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# **Adorno and the Problem of Philosophy**

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**Middlesex University**

**PhD Thesis**

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## Abstract

This thesis examines the problem of philosophy in the work of Theodor W. Adorno, in the context of its significance for the idea of Critical Theory and, in particular, in the light of the dominant contemporary obstacle to its revaluation: the criticism of Jürgen Habermas. The thesis attempts to provide a critical elaboration of the concept of philosophy as it is indicated by Adorno, in order to demonstrate its coherence and value as a modern critical discipline, with a continuing and decisive importance for the project of Critical Theory. **Chapter 1** introduces the problem of philosophy in Adorno, through demonstrating how Habermas's criticism fails to recognise the precise character of Adorno's engagement with philosophy, and thereby mis-recognises its significance for Critical Theory. **Chapter 2** introduces the reassessment of the idea of philosophy in Adorno through an elaboration of the interpretative demands it imposes, revealing its relation to a discourse of metaphilosophy. It elaborates the self-reflective constitution of philosophy. as a form of interpretation which the concept of philosophy is itself subject to, with particular attention to the interpretation of philosophy's obsolescence and need. **Chapter 3** elaborates Adorno's understanding of the paradoxical relation of philosophy to the division of labour as a 'non-specialist specialism'. It discerns its relation to a set of non-philosophical practices, as dialectical relations of anti-philosophy; and elaborates Adorno's expansive, but critical concept of philosophy as what, after Kant, may be called a 'world-concept of philosophising'. **Chapter 4** examines the presentation of philosophy in Adorno, elaborating its linguistic medium as it is articulated through the relation of dialectical concepts to their sign and image qualities; and the novel non-dogmatic forms Adorno developed following the French Encyclopaedists, Kant, early German Romanticism and Benjamin. **Chapter 5** analyses the peculiar speculative form of Adorno's dialectical concept of philosophy. It demonstrates its relation to the three speculative philosophies most influential to him – those of Kant, Hegel and Benjamin – and examines the conception of metaphysics it generates. **Chapter 6** examines the form of time-consciousness that philosophy was to be for Adorno. It elaborates his idea of natural history as an alternative to Hegel's historical conception of philosophy and the critical relation to Benjamin's historiography of truth that informs it. This is developed in relation to its illuminating allusions to Freudian psychoanalysis and the concept of ideology-critique that emerges from the historical interpretation of semblance as an interpretation of truth.



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## Introduction

### Adorno and the problem of philosophy

Theodor W. Adorno currently has something of a dual status: apparently outmoded by Jürgen Habermas's attempt to transform Critical Theory, on the one hand; revered as a canonical thinker, on the other. The sides of this split reputation are, of course, not unrelated. Not only has Adorno been valued as an alternative to Habermas, he has also been regarded as a pivotal or transitional figure within modern intellectual culture more generally.<sup>1</sup> The concept of philosophy has in many ways been pivotal to Adorno's controversial status and, if this has been only cursorily acknowledged in some of the revisions of Adorno,<sup>2</sup> this recognition has also been notably deepened.<sup>3</sup> This thesis attempts to contribute to this revised view of Adorno's philosophical significance and in a very direct way. It attempts to demonstrate the coherence and value of Adorno's idea of philosophy and to show it to be decisive to the emancipatory form of critique that was the classical preoccupation of Critical Theory – a

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<sup>1</sup> This is true of as mutually opposed commentators as Gillian Rose and Habermas himself. See also Jean-François Lyotard, 'Adorno as the Devil', trans. R. Hurley, *Telos* vol.19 (1984/5), pp.127-37; Gillian Rose, 'From Speculative to Dialectic Thinking - Hegel and Adorno' in *Judaism and Modernity: Philosophical Essays* (Blackwell, Oxford, Cambridge Ma., 1993), pp.53-64; Interview with Jürgen Habermas by A. Honneth et al, 'The Dialectics of Rationalisation' (22 May and 10 July 1981) in *Autonomy and Solidarity: Interviews* ed. P. Dews (Verso, London, New York, 1986) pp.97-8.

<sup>2</sup> Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin and the Frankfurt Institute* (Freedom Press, New York, 1977). Gillian Rose, *The Melancholy Science: An Introduction to the Thought of Theodor W. Adorno* (Macmillan, London, 1978). Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno, or, the Persistence of the Dialectic* (Verso, London and New York, 1990).

<sup>3</sup> See for instance J.M. Bernstein's *The Fate of Art: Aesthetic Alienation from Kant to Derrida and Adorno*, (Polity Press, Cambridge, 1992); *Recovering Ethical Life: Jürgen Habermas and the Future of Critical Theory* (Routledge, London, New York, 1995); and *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, New York, 2001). See also, Simon Jarvis, *Adorno: A Critical Introduction* (Polity Press, Cambridge, 1998).



contention that was common to Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse – and to defend it against its marginalisation by Habermas. This is its point of departure in Chapter 1. Critical Theory presents a dual concern with philosophy, on the one hand, and various social sciences, on the other.<sup>4</sup> But the acknowledgement of this dualism tends to deepen rather than to clarify the problem of how the idea of philosophy was itself transformed in this process. It is therefore liable to lead to an isolation of philosophy from the social sciences, which has been a feature of post-Habermasian Critical Theory. This thesis attempts to counter this marginalisation by elaborating the idea of philosophy as it emerges from Adorno's writings.

It is the sustained directness of the reading of Adorno's idea of philosophy that distinguishes this thesis from other comparable endeavours. My concern here is with the problem of philosophy in Adorno, and only in this regard is it about whatever may be assumed to be properly philosophical problems. It is therefore distinct from the preoccupation with Adorno's philosophy as an aesthetics or philosophy of art.<sup>5</sup> Art is of course fundamental to his concept of philosophy, yet it is also characteristic of the post-Habermasian transformation of Critical Theory to marginalize the problem of philosophy in Adorno as the

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<sup>4</sup> 'The oppositional movement of Critical Theory is refined as it engages with its philosophical (Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche) and social scientific (Marx, Weber and Freud) sources, finding and transforming a tradition of thought for itself, and then at a later stage, self-consciously transformatively reworking its own history.' J.M. Bernstein, 'Critical Theory - The Very Idea: Reflections on Nihilism and Domination' *Recovering Ethical Life: Jürgen Habermas and the Future of Critical Theory* (Routledge, London, New York, 1995), pp.11-12.

<sup>5</sup> As it appears in Bernstein, *The Fate of Art: Aesthetic Alienation from Kant to Derrida and Adorno*. See also Christoph Menke, *The Sovereignty of Art: Aesthetic Negativity in Adorno and Derrida*, trans. N. Solomon, (MIT Press, Cambridge Ma., London, 1998). In many respects Menke pursues the Habermasian reading that Albrecht Wellmer has developed. See for instance, Albrecht Wellmer's 'Truth, Semblance, reconciliation: Adorno's Aesthetic Redemption of Modernity' in *The Persistence of Modernity: Essays on Aesthetics, Ethics and Postmodernism* trans. D. Midgley (MIT Press, Cambridge Ma., London, 1991) and 'Adorno, Modernity and the Sublime' in ed. Max Pensky *The Actuality of Adorno* (SUNY Press, New York, 1997), pp.112-34.

regional concern of one aspect of the neo-Kantian division of value spheres, the aesthetic. This thesis attempts to interpret Adorno's idea of philosophy directly and emphatically, and therefore in such a way that his confrontation with Habermas is made explicit.

Philosophy is a word that is so broad in its meanings that it may appear a foolishly generalised or ambitious object of examination. This may account for its ironic absence in so many philosophical investigations of Adorno.<sup>6</sup> This thesis is about the determinations that this apparently very abstract concept is nonetheless forced to take on by its problematisation. It concerns philosophy as the name of a problem or a problematic, in which a context of problems surrounds a particular focal point, in relation to which these problems are constituted, however tangentially. It does not presuppose Adorno's continuity with a traditional canon of philosophical problems, but examines this tradition as it is received through Adorno's problematisation of the idea of philosophy. It is in this sense a metaphilosophical examination of Adorno's philosophy. This is not to say that it examines the problem of philosophy from an external vantage point. Its point of departure is Adorno's own metaphilosophical reflections. The problem of philosophy in Adorno is examined as a problem *for* Adorno, and only thereby as a problem for his interpretation and significance. The 'object' of this thesis is the idea of philosophy that emerges through this combination of problems.

Adorno's idea of philosophy cannot be simply defined at the beginning of its examination, or at its end. It is such that it emerges through the elaboration of the problems

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<sup>6</sup> There are of course exceptions, not least in parts of the studies cited above. But these are rarely sustained exercises. Conversely, there are exceptions that prove the rule, such as Thomas McCarthy, 'The Idea of a Critical Theory and its Relation to Philosophy' in eds. S.Benhabib, W.Bonss and J.McCole, *On Max Horkheimer: New Perspectives* (MIT Press, Massachusetts, London, 1993), pp.127-52. This presents the post-Habermasian suppression of philosophy within Critical Theory and excludes any real discussion of Adorno.



that it faces. Its examination must be reiterative and excursive. The question of what philosophy is, must be posed each time it is brought to self-consciousness in Adorno's texts as a problem, and then elaborated in terms of what is indicated about the idea of philosophy as such by his treatment of these problems. Therefore, Chapter 2 deals with the contradictory task of philosophy's self-criticism; its critique of itself in a form that is not its determination by some other discipline. Chapter 3 deals with philosophy's contradictory relation to the division of labour as a specialist non-specialism. Chapter 4 deals with philosophy's delimited but open and self-transgressive forms of presentation. Chapter 5 elaborates philosophy's speculative thinking of truth through semblance or illusion. Chapter 6 examines the contradiction history generates for philosophy's presentation of the absolute. These problems, stated pre-emptively, sound like paradoxes or impossible tasks. This is indeed what they are at first glance. Their possibility can only be established through their elaboration. Adorno's idea of philosophy resists itemisation. It must be composed or performed. Contrary to Habermas's criticism of the 'performative contradictions' that Adorno is subject to, along with other modernist philosophers<sup>7</sup> – namely, that apparently coherent positions are revealed to contradict themselves through their performance – philosophy emerges through explicit contradictions which are only resolved through their performance. This thesis attempts to present the constellatory or distributive form in which the idea of philosophy is meaningful in Adorno. It attempts to present the fragmentary centre of the problem, but this is the only claim to exhaustiveness that is appropriate, regardless of modesty. Adorno's own intentions are a clue to this investigation, but not its primary object. 'Adorno' is in this sense the name for an idea of philosophy that is revealed through his treatment of its problems. Theodor W. Adorno is himself the occasion, not the ultimate object of this examination.

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<sup>7</sup> See Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourses of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, trans. F. Lawrence (Polity Press, Cambridge, 1987).

## Chapter 1

### Habermas's critique of Critical Theory

Habermas understands his own work to have produced a paradigm shift within the project of Critical Theory, but not a break from it. This produces a periodization of Critical Theory that distinguishes distinct phases of development from the new perspective achieved by Habermas's work; an articulation both demanded and enabled by its novelty. With Habermas's critique, therefore, Critical Theory becomes for the first time the name for a tradition. It is no longer simply the emergent name for a living project, but the established name for a project with a past that has become problematic and in need of critique. Habermas's critique of Critical Theory does not propose simply an extension of its established course, but rather its radical transformation, in order to renew its initial conception in Horkheimer's earliest proposals, as a programme of 'interdisciplinary materialism'.<sup>1</sup> Its originality is therefore presented as a transformed return to the origins of Critical Theory. This involves the diagnosis of transformation within Critical Theory, prior to Habermas's intervention, in which it departs from its initial orientation. This is located in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which Habermas interprets as the transitional text in Critical Theory's 'wrong turn' during the years of the Frankfurt School's exile in America during the Second World War; the attempt to resolve a crisis in the initial project of Critical Theory, precipitated by the events emerging through the war.<sup>2</sup> For Habermas, this attempt has failed

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<sup>1</sup> Jürgen Habermas, 'Remarks on the Development of Horkheimer's Work' (1986), trans. K. Baynes and J. McCole, in eds. S. Benhabib, W. Bonss and J. McCole, *On Max Horkheimer: New Perspectives* (MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, London, 1993), pp. 50-1.

<sup>2</sup> Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialektik der Aufklärung: Philosophische Fragmente* (completed 1944, first published 1947), published in Theodor W. Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften*,

and demands a return to the initial programme of Critical Theory, albeit fundamentally transformed by a theory of communicative action. Four periods may thus be seen to emerge as a consequence of Habermas's critique.

**First period:** dated from Horkheimer's assumption of the directorship of the Institute of Social Research and its journal, *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, in 1931, until his collaboration with Adorno on *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in 1941.<sup>3</sup> Theoretically, Habermas identifies it with the programme of an 'interdisciplinary materialism', introduced in his inaugural, programmatic text, 'The Present Situation of Social Philosophy and the Tasks of an Institute for Social Research' (1931)<sup>4</sup>, and, brought to classic, if already problematic, expression in, 'Traditional and Critical Theory' (1937).<sup>5</sup> Following Hauke Bunkhorst, Habermas understands the early Horkheimer as, 'an "anti-philosopher" in a manner different from Adorno and Marcuse'<sup>6</sup>, whose early programme presented a 'materialist deconstruction of philosophy' that was distinct from both Adorno's and Marcuse's relation to philosophy.<sup>7</sup>

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Bd.3, (Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1969,1997), trans. J.Cumming, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Verso, London, New York, 1979).

<sup>3</sup> Although, Adorno had already remarked in his letter to Benjamin of 8 June 1938, that he and Horkheimer were to 'collaborate in writing a major essay on the new, open form of dialectic.' Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence (1928-40)* trans. N.Walker (Polity Press, Cambridge, 1999), p.255.

<sup>4</sup> Published in Max Horkheimer, *Between Philosophy and Science: Selected Early Writings* (MIT Press, Cambridge MA, London, 1993), pp.1-14.

<sup>5</sup> Published in Max Horkheimer, *Critical Theory: Selected Essays* (Continuum, New York, 1995), pp.188-244.

<sup>6</sup> Jürgen Habermas, 'Remarks on the Development of Horkheimer's Work' trans. K.Baynes and J.McCole, in eds. S.Benhabib, W.Bonss and J.McCole, *On Max Horkheimer: New Perspectives* (MIT Press, Cambridge MA, London, 1993), p.50.

<sup>7</sup> '...only Horkheimer joined a transformed and highly individual understanding of philosophy to his programme of interdisciplinary materialism. He wanted to continue philosophy by other means, namely, the social sciences. The social scientists were not especially interested in this, and the



**Second, transitional period:** framed by Horkheimer and Adorno's collaborative work on *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, from c.1941 until its completion in 1944. Theoretically, Habermas characterises it as a dissolution of Horkheimer's attempt to transform philosophy into an 'interdisciplinary materialism', and the emergence of Adorno's influence on the articulation of Critical Theory, indicated through a turn to a more emphatically philosophical critique of the sciences and enabled by a negative thinking of totality, derived in part from Benjamin.

**Third period:** dated from the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* until the death of Adorno in 1969. Theoretically, it is characterised by Habermas as a period of attempting to negotiate the consequences of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, manifested pre-eminently by Adorno's *Negative Dialectics*(1966) and *Aesthetic Theory*(1970), and Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization*(1955) and *One-Dimensional Man*(1964).<sup>8</sup> Habermas considers Adorno to have developed the most consistent and rigorous elaboration of the negative form of critique developed in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, while Marcuse's work is characterised as a withdrawal from this aporetic legacy into a theory of instincts.<sup>9</sup> Horkheimer's post-Second

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philosophers in the circle, Adorno and Marcuse, probable did not take it completely seriously....[I]t constitutes an original, anti-Heideggerian response to the 'end of metaphysics'. As long as philosophy cannot be actualised, it must be transferred to another medium in order not to degenerate into ideology – and for Horkheimer this medium should be the social sciences gathered fused, and renewed in the reflector of a critical theory of society.' Habermas, Ibid. pp.50-1.

<sup>8</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, Gesammelte Werke Bd.6, (Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1966,1977) trans. E.B.Ashton, *Negative Dialectics* (Routledge, London, 1973); *Ästhetische Theorie* (Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1970) trans. B.Hullot-Kentor *Aesthetic Theory* (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1997). Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (Beacon Press, Boston, 1964; Routledge, London, 1991); *Eros and Civilization* (Beacon Press, Boston, 1955; Sphere Books, London, 1969).

<sup>9</sup> See Habermas's comments on Adorno below in subsection '*The precipice of philosophical modernism*'. On Habermas's judgement of Marcuse see '*Psychic Thermidor and the Rebirth of*

World War work is characterised as fundamentally disoriented by the consequences of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and therefore symptomatic of the impasse that it created.

**Fourth period:** dating from Adorno's death until, effectively, the present. Habermas characterises it theoretically as the move from the paradigm of a philosophy of consciousness and a neo-Hegelian philosophy of history, to a linguistically informed theory of communicative action conceived in terms of intersubjective relations, manifested most fully in his *Theory of Communicative Action*.<sup>10</sup>

This periodization, read critically, reveals a set of alternative positions and programmes of Critical Theory. But, as a periodization, it also tends to dissolve these alternatives into a progressive narrative leading to Habermas as its only horizon. These alternatives are presented, in part at least, as competing critiques of philosophy. All the principal theorists of Critical Theory present it through a critique of philosophy as a decisive, but fundamentally problematic tradition. With Habermas, the critique of philosophy is continued, but in a radicalised form. Habermas understands his work to enable a return of Critical Theory to its close inter-relation with the sciences and a withdrawal from the aporetic deepening of its relation to philosophy that he interprets in Adorno's work. Moreover, his transformation of presuppositions that even Horkheimer's initial programme was subject to, is presented as a move away from the remnants of an anachronistic debt to philosophy that characterise all phases of Critical Theory, prior to Habermas's turn to a theory of communicative action. Critical Theory's relation to philosophy is therefore transformed in the

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Rebellious Subjectivity' (1980) in *Habermas and Modernity* ed. R.J. Bernstein (Polity Press, Cambridge, 1985), pp.67-77.

<sup>10</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action* vols.1&2 (1981&1983) trans. Thomas McCarthy (Polity Press, Cambridge, 1984&1987). It is perhaps possible to identify a fifth period of Critical Theory, subsequent to Habermas's work, incorporating theorists occasionally referred to as a third generation Frankfurt School, such as Wellmer and Honneth.



light of Habermas' critique. He certainly does not create the problem of philosophy for Critical Theory's self-understanding, but intensifies it in a new form. Early Critical Theory's debt to philosophy is thrown into question again, but now in an avowedly 'postmetaphysical' critique. The explicitness with which Habermas provides a systematically developed alternative to philosophy, produces a confrontation with the concept of philosophy that is more directly posed than most of the other influential critiques of the Frankfurt School. It is evident that this is precisely because he proposes such an emphatic shift of paradigm. Philosophy therefore becomes an index of the positions of the various projects of Critical Theory; not simply in the sense that their method is in question, but, more profoundly, in respect of the status of Critical Theory as a modern theoretical form and its relation to a problematic tradition.

### ***Dialectic of Enlightenment as crisis***

*Dialectic of Enlightenment* is the first major product of a crisis in the programme of Critical Theory, a crisis precipitated by a transformation of the socio-political conditions presupposed by its initial programme; namely, the chronic perversions of proletarian emancipatory projects in the pre- and inter-war years, represented by the emergence of Stalinism, Fascism and a newly consolidated form of capitalism. *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is the attempt not only to respond to this crisis, but, in doing so, to renew the theory of crisis that it had hitherto assumed. In Horkheimer's early programme for Critical Theory, Lukács's broadly Left Hegelian reading of Marx had provided the model of crisis: modern capitalist societies are prone to crises and the political agent capable of seizing the opportunity for emancipation in

these crises is the proletariat.<sup>11</sup> As the agent of emancipation, the proletariat is understood to be realising the ideals of enlightenment, which had been betrayed by the socio-political dominance of the bourgeoisie as a particular rather than a universal interest in the emancipation of humanity. Lukács had combined this with a critique of the bureaucratic rationalisation of social institutions, derived principally from Max Weber, including institutions ostensibly of enlightenment, such as the sciences. Critical Theory was therefore conceived, following Lukács, as an immanent critique of capitalist society, including the institutions of enlightenment, which aids the exposure of contradictions within capitalist societies, their tendency towards crises, and thereby aids the political project of emancipation from capitalism. Critical Theory is therefore conceived as a critique of the crises of capitalism in order to produce its revolution. The addressee of Critical Theory – the subject it constitutes in its criticism – is, as it is for Lukács, the political agent of that revolution, the proletariat. The realisation of Critical Theory was not possible without the realisation of that political emancipation.

This programme is thrown into crisis in the face of the tragic developments of proletarian politics. Helmut Dubiel has identified three decisive problems: (1) The Soviet Union's demonstration of Weber's bureaucratisation thesis and its confirmation of Rosa Luxemburg's critique of the Leninist theory of organisation; (2) Fascism's demonstration of the ability of advanced capitalist societies to respond in critical situations to the danger of revolutionary change by restructuring the political system; (3) Western capitalism's (particularly, America's) demonstration of its capacity for social control and integration

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<sup>11</sup> See Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics* (1922) trans. R. Livingstone (Merlin Press, London, 1971), in particular 'The Standpoint of the Proletariat', pp. 149-222.

without open repression, through the culture industry.<sup>12</sup> These transformations contribute to undermining Critical Theory's confidence in the emergence of the proletariat from the crises of capitalism as an agent of emancipation and therefore the basic assumption that capitalism produced the conditions of its own transformation. Critical Theory's theory of crisis entered a crisis of its own. This was not limited to its relation to political movements, but also its entwinement with other institutions of enlightenment, particularly the social sciences and the arts, which increasingly demanded criticism of their contribution to the perversion of political emancipation. This results in a critical self-reflection of Critical Theory's immanence to the institutions of enlightenment, a reflection in which its status as a programme of criticism is transformed.

*From ideology-critique to independent and totalising critique*

Habermas depicts Critical Theory's critical self-reflection as a transformation of its form of critique from 'ideology-critique' into 'independent and totalising critique'. Habermas understands ideology-critique to be immanent to the process of enlightenment insofar as it presupposes a process of demythologisation whereby the relations of man and nature are differentiated (the denaturalisation of the human world and the desocialization of the natural world); a process that for Habermas ultimately produces a neo-Kantian division of three distinct value spheres corresponding to Kant's three critiques of reason, and socially instituted broadly in the practices of science, morality and art. Ideology-critique pursues enlightenment through the prosecution of suspected mixtures and confusions of the natural

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<sup>12</sup> See Helmut Dubiel, *Theory and Practice: Studies in the Development of Critical Theory*, trans. B.Clegg (MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 1985). Also see Albrecht Wellmer's discussion of the post-Luxemburgian constitution of Critical Theory in the essay, 'Critique of Instrumental Reason and Critical Social Theory', in Albrecht Wellmer, *Critical Theory of Society*, trans. J.Cumming (Herder and Herder, 1971).



and the human, and of one value sphere with another. Ideology-critique is not itself a theory which competes with other theories. It is a 'procedure' that proceeds immanently, within the theories it submits to criticism, according to various theoretical assumptions. With ideology-critique, Habermas claims, the enlightenment becomes self-reflective for the first time, since it becomes suspicious of its own processes of demythologisation. Nonetheless, it does not abandon the ideals of this project. It is the reflective continuation of enlightenment.

Habermas's critique of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is premised on the claim that it threatens to abandon ideology-critique's continuity with enlightenment through a further process of critical self-reflection: the suspicion of ideology-critique itself. This second-order suspicion questions the very ideals of the project of enlightenment. In so doing, critique questions its own immanence within the project of enlightenment and appeals to an independence from which to judge this project.<sup>13</sup> Critique thereby questions the enlightenment as a whole, producing a radical critical self-reflection which Habermas terms 'independent and totalising critique'. This is the lesson that Adorno and Horkheimer derive from the "'black" writers' of the bourgeoisie, such as de Sade and, in particular, Nietzsche.<sup>14</sup> Habermas's objection to this

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<sup>13</sup> 'With...[ideology] critique, enlightenment becomes reflective for the first time; it is performed with respect to its own products – theories. Yet the drama of enlightenment first arrives at its climax when ideology critique *itself* comes under suspicion of not producing (any more) truths – and the enlightenment attains second-order reflectiveness. Then doubt reaches out to include reason, whose standards ideology critique had found already given in bourgeois ideals and had simply taken at their word. *Dialectic of Enlightenment* takes this step – it renders critique independent even in relation to its own foundations.' Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourses of Modernity: Twelve Lectures* trans. F. Lawrence (Polity Press, Cambridge, 1987), p.116.

<sup>14</sup> 'If the cynical consciousness of the 'black' writers speaks the truth about bourgeois culture, ideology critique does not have anything in reserve to which it might appeal; and when the forces of production enter into a baneful symbiosis with the relations of production that they were supposed to blow wide open, there is no longer any dynamism upon which critique could base its hope. Horkheimer and Adorno regard the foundations of ideology critique as shattered – and yet they would

form of critique is that it undermines its own foundations by the totalization of critique. It proposes the contradictory task of questioning the very conditions that make its questioning possible. He describes it as a 'performative contradiction' because the contradiction is revealed through the performance or employment of the critique, ruining the intentions of the critique through the attempt to practice it. This programme of an independent and totalising critique finds its principal target in the critique of instrumental reason, which through the critique of enlightenment's totalisation of reason into pragmatic self-preservation, submits the enlightenment to a totalising critique from the independent perspective of a non-instrumental reason:

This concept of [instrumental reason] is simultaneously supposed to recall that when purposive rationality, overblown into a totality, abolishes the distinction between what claims validity and what is useful for self-preservation, and so tears down the barrier between validity and power, it cancels out those basic conceptual differentiations to which the modern understanding of the world believed it owed the definitive overcoming of myth. As instrumental, reason assimilated itself to power and thereby relinquished its critical force – that is the *final* disclosure of ideology critique applied to itself.<sup>15</sup>

The consequence of this totalised critique is that it threatens to destroy the tripartite division of reason, reunifying it negatively, as instrumental. It therefore threatens to ruin what Habermas regards as a decisive achievement of the enlightenment's departure from a metaphysical totalisation of reason. In terms of the development of Critical Theory, the development of a totalising and independent critique has the consequence of undermining its

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still like to hold on to the basic figure of enlightenment. So what enlightenment has perpetuated on myth, they apply to the process of enlightenment as a whole. Inasmuch as it turns against reason as the foundation of its own validity, critique becomes total.' Ibid. pp.118-9.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. p.119.



immanence to the institutions of enlightenment, particularly for Habermas, its relation to science.<sup>16</sup>

### *The precipice of philosophical modernism*

Habermas understands *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as the elaboration of a deep crisis for enlightenment, not its resolution. He characterises it as the self-conscious persistence within an aporetic predicament, which refuses the two principal ways out of this crisis: the dissolution of enlightenment <sup>or</sup> ~~and~~ the return to a more classical form of enlightenment. This is what gives it its peculiar and, in many respects, decisive significance within the history of modern thought for Habermas. On the one hand, it brings the project of enlightenment into suspicion as a whole, questioning its conditions of possibility. On the other hand, even though it takes its inspiration from attempts to subvert the project of enlightenment, it withdraws categorically from attempts to end or displace enlightenment. According to Habermas, it is canonically Nietzsche who attempts to resolve the performative contradictions inherent in an independent and totalising form of critique, by the dissolution of

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<sup>16</sup> Habermas refers to Adorno and Horkheimer's prefatory remarks in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as evidence of this consequence and the break it generates with the previous programme of Critical Theory:

Even though we had known for many years that the discoveries of modern applied science are paid for with an increasing diminution of theoretical culture [*Bildung*] ~~in the process~~, we still thought that in regard to scientific activity our contribution could be restricted to the critique or extension of regional theories. Thematically, at any rate, we were to keep to the traditional disciplines: to sociology, psychology, and epistemology.

However, the fragments united in this volume show that we were forced to abandon this conviction. If the assiduous maintenance and verification of the scientific heritage are an essential part of knowledge (especially where zealous positivists have treated it as useless ballast and consigned it to oblivion), in the present collapse of bourgeois civilization not only the pursuit but the meaning of science has become problematical in that regard.

Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, p. <sup>11</sup>~~10~~/ Translation (altered), p.xi.

enlightenment: firstly, through a collapse of the differentiation of myth and enlightenment via a recovery of mythic origins; and secondly, through a collapse of the differentiation of validity and power via the embrace of a theory of power. This results in the replacement of ideology-critique by genealogy.<sup>17</sup> Habermas distinguishes Adorno and Horkheimer's programme from that of Nietzsche's, insofar as it does not propose to overcome the performative contradiction of independent and totalising critique.<sup>18</sup> Rather, it attempts to self-consciously sustain it as an extension of the project of enlightenment. It is this peculiar continuation of enlightenment that differentiates them from the neo-Nietzscheanism of post-structuralism, for Habermas. This distinction is only a qualified defence. Its attempt to continue enlightenment is, for Habermas, paralysed by its contradictions and not only does it ruin the classical project of enlightenment, but it thereby weakens the resistance to a neo-Nietzschean conservatism that he diagnoses in post-structuralism.<sup>19</sup> Habermas's response to this situation is to return to a more classical conception of the enlightenment and recover ideology-critique as a non-totalising and non-independent participant within the value spheres of enlightenment. With respect to the task of a Critical Theory of society this means a more

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<sup>17</sup> 'Once the critical sense of saying 'No' is suspended and the procedure of negation is rendered impotent, Nietzsche goes back to the very dimension of the myth of origins that permits a distinction which affects *all other* dimensions: What is *older* is *earlier* in the generational chain and nearer to the origin. The *more primordial* is considered the more worthy of honour, the preferable, the more unspoiled, the purer: It is deemed better. *Derivation* and *descent* serve as criteria of rank, in both the social and logical senses.' Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, pp.125-6.

<sup>18</sup> 'Horkheimer and Adorno adopt another option [from that of Nietzsche] by stirring up, holding open, and no longer wanting to overcome theoretically the performative contradiction inherent in an ideology critique that outstrips itself. Any attempt to develop a theory at this level of reflection would have to slide off into the groundless; they therefore eschew theory and practice determinate negation on an ad hoc basis...' Ibid. pp.127-8.

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, Jürgen Habermas, 'Modernity – An Incomplete Project', in ed. H.Foster, *Postmodern Culture* (Bay Press, New York, 1983; Pluto Press, London, 1985), pp.3-15.



indebted and less destructive engagement with the social sciences. Habermas's diagnosis of these alternative responses to enlightenment has the metaphorical form of standing on a precipice. *Dialectic of Enlightenment* stands on the edge refusing to go on and refusing to go back. The Nietzscheans step forward into the abyss of conservatism. Habermas turns back to a reaffirmation of the project of enlightenment.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Habermas outlines his characterization of Adorno's decisive significance for Critical Theory and modern thought more generally, with particular clarity in the following passage, taken from a interview conducted with Honneth et al prior to the publication of *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*:

What I consider Adorno's greatness, what gives him his place in the history of philosophy, is the fact that he was the only one to develop remorselessly and spell out the paradoxes of this form of theory construction, of the dialectic of enlightenment that unfolds the whole as the untrue. In this sense of critical, he was one of the most systematic and effective thinkers I know. Of course, one can draw various conclusions from the results. Either one presses on in the illuminating exercise of negative philosophy, to the insight with which one is forced to endure that, if a spark of reason is left, then it is to be found in esoteric art. Or, on the other hand, one takes a step back and says to oneself: Adorno has shown that one must go back a stage before the dialectic of enlightenment because as a scientist, one cannot live with the paradoxes of a self-negating philosophy. If one takes Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* and *Aesthetic Theory* seriously and accepts them, and if one then wishes to advance just one more step beyond this scene out of Beckett, then one has to become something of a poststructuralist to conceptualise it. Adorno never took this step. He would have considered it a betrayal of the rational heritage of Critical Theory. I don't think it is possible for Critical Theory in its strictest form to refer to any form of empirical or even discursive analysis of social conditions.

From, 'The Dialectics of Rationalisation' (22 May and 10 July 1981) in *Autonomy and Solidarity: Interviews* ed. P.Dews (Verso, London, New York, 1986) pp.97-8. This diagnosis of the decisive, but finally fundamentally misconceived status of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and Adorno's thought more generally is shared by critics of Habermas. Two particularly noteworthy instances are Jean-François Lyotard, 'Adorno as the Devil' trans. R.Hurley *Telos* vol.19 (1984/5) pp.127-37; and Gillian Rose, 'From Speculative to Dialectic Thinking - Hegel and Adorno' in *Judaism and Modernity: Philosophical Essays* (Blackwell, Oxford, Cambridge Ma., 1993), pp.53-64.

## Re-philosophization

Habermas distinguishes Adorno from the other principal theoreticians of the Frankfurt School (namely, Horkheimer and Marcuse) as providing the most consistent and rigorous elaboration of the consequences induced by *Dialectic of Enlightenment* for a Critical Theory of society. He therefore treats Adorno as the major opponent and obstacle to his attempt to renew Critical Theory through the recovery of Horkheimer's original programme of 'interdisciplinary materialism', albeit transformed through a neo-Kantian theory of communicative action. His criticisms of Adorno emerge largely from the objections he makes to 'independent and totalising critique' from this transformed perspective. This takes multiple and complex forms. However, a conspicuously reiterated motif is Adorno's entwinement in the problem of philosophy. While Habermas often interprets this problem in such a way that indicates specific disputes over methods or disciplines – such as, his criticism of Adorno's 'philosophy of history' or 'philosophy of consciousness' – the issue of philosophy is not simply that of particular philosophical methods or perspectives. Tendentially, it is the issue of philosophy as such, particularly, in its emphatic, traditional form of metaphysics. It proposes a radicalisation of the distinction of Critical Theory and metaphysics that cuts through their deep entwinement in the thought of Adorno. The dispute between Habermas's and Adorno's concepts of Critical Theory therefore becomes a dispute over the concept of philosophy itself.

Habermas does not crudely propose that Adorno simply collapses Critical Theory into philosophy. This would be clearly erroneous. Adorno develops a far-reaching critique of traditional philosophy at great length, to which Habermas is explicitly indebted. Habermas's criticism is both more circumspect and strategically staged, and consequently in need of elaboration. It is directed at the limitations of Adorno's critique of philosophy and the consequences this has, rather than at any simple identification of Adorno with traditional philosophy. Habermas's criticism is that Adorno's development of Critical Theory not only



fails to fully overcome decisive debts to traditional philosophy, but thereby weakens the distinction of Critical Theory from philosophy, which Habermas interprets in Horkheimer's initial programme. These consequences inflect Adorno's critique of philosophy, judging it strategically as the elaboration of a rapprochement of Critical Theory with philosophy. Habermas hereby accuses Adorno of 're-philosophizing' of Critical Theory.<sup>21</sup>

It is in this polemical discourse of theoretical positions, understood in terms of strategic tendencies, and informed by Habermas's new, declaratively 'post-metaphysical' theory of communicative action, that philosophy becomes a decisive problem or stake in the dispute between Habermas's and Adorno's concepts of Critical Theory. The significance of the problem of philosophy in this dispute is not merely its abstraction or generalization of a series of sub-problems – such as 'the philosophy of consciousness' or the 'philosophy of history' – as if it were merely a classificatory concept, in which a complex interaction can be understood more easily, in a simple form. Its significance is more concrete. It has the character of a real abstraction. As something that Adorno and Habermas both hold in common, the critique of philosophy is both a point at which they touch most closely and therefore a point at which their divergence can be elaborated most decisively. The problem of philosophy is determined concretely by its polemical function within the dispute, as one of, if

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<sup>21</sup> Habermas borrows this term from Helmut Dubiel:

Helmut Dubiel provides an excellent analysis of the change in [the Frankfurt School's] views on the relation between philosophy and science and on the status of social theory.... He traces through the thirties the 're-philosophizing' of the whole theoretical orientation of the Institute in its emigration to the United States.

Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action* vol.1, fn.70, p.454.

This borrowed term, used in a footnote, reflects the circumspection of his critique of Adorno, registering the exaggeration in its use. However, it is an exaggeration in which the strategy of Habermas's critique of Adorno reveals itself.



not its most decisive stakes, thereby articulating the concept of the dispute itself.<sup>22</sup> The articulation of this dispute is simultaneously an articulation of the concept of philosophy itself, in a form which is exemplary for metaphilosophy. It determines the concept of philosophy through a radical critique of the crisis its end generates for the task of a Critical Theory of society.

### *Mimesis as paradox*

Habermas's critique of Adorno focuses on the pivotal significance of mimesis for Adorno's elaboration of a self-negating philosophy and, consequently, the crippling paradoxes it supposedly generates for Critical Theory. More affirmatively, Habermas interprets Adorno's problematic engagement with mimesis as the unconscious anticipation of the turn of Critical Theory to a theory of communicative action, which is to provide the solution to these paradoxes.

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer identify mimesis as a dimension of reason that is incrementally repressed in enlightenment's instrumentalisation of reason. Mimesis is treated as a symptom or index of this development. The eradication of the mimetic dimension of reason is interpreted as characteristic of the development of reason into a power of abstraction, through which it can attain control, through knowledge, over what

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<sup>22</sup> Louis Althusser has stressed the essentially polemical and strategic function of philosophy in a way that has considerable resonance in this dispute between Habermas and Adorno, despite being removed from either of their explicit concerns:

...philosophy, which has no *object* (in the sense that a science has an object), has *stakes*; philosophy does not produce knowledges but states *Theses*, etc. Its *Theses* open the way to a *correct* position on the problems of scientific and political practice, etc.

Louis Althusser, 'Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists', in *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists*, trans. Ben Brewster (Verso, London, New York, 1990), p.72.

threatens self-preservation. This informs their interpretation of the dissolution of mimetic qualities from abstract forms of representation, such as the development of systems of signification in which the mimetic relation between the sign (or signifier) and what it signifies is rendered purely arbitrary and inconsequential to its meaning.<sup>23</sup> This dissolution enables great powers of abstraction in the knowledge, control and exploitation of an environment for the purpose of self-preservation. However, it also threatens to introduce blind forms of domination that – although, ostensibly conceived in terms of enlightenment, as the self-preservation and emancipation of humanity – ultimately frustrate and conflict with that project of enlightenment. For example, knowledge of nature enables its domination and exploitation in the self-preservation of humanity and, therefore, its emancipation from domination by a hostile nature. But once awareness of that domination is repressed as abstract and interest free, awareness of the domination of nature within humanity is also repressed. This threatens to subject humanity to new forms of domination, which are all the more deeply obscured by the extent to which they are disguised as forms of enlightenment. Adorno and Horkheimer do not propose a return to a lost past in which mimesis was yet to be repressed. Rather, their proposal is that it needs to be recognised within enlightenment, as enlightenment's critical self-reflection, through which enlightenment avoids becoming its own enemy; reverting the enlightenment of myth into a new myth.

Habermas interprets this concern for mimesis as generating a paradox for Critical Theory. He recognises that *Dialectic of Enlightenment* does not propose a primitivism and that the project is the extension of enlightenment. However, he regards the subjection of enlightenment to a critique of its entwinement in the instrumental domination of nature as undermining the separation of reason from nature, which he considers to be a decisive

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<sup>23</sup> See section 'Sign, image, concept' in chapter 4, below.



advance in enlightenment; an advance he refers to as the emergence of ‘procedural reason’.<sup>24</sup> As a consequence, Adorno and Horkheimer invoke, through their interpretation of mimesis, a metaphysical or ontological concept of reason, which, although only presented critically, undermines the legitimacy of the enlightenment’s development of de-ontological, methodological or ‘procedural’ forms of reasoning. Adorno and Horkheimer only invoke this metaphysical legacy critically, because it is subject to the same critique of instrumental reason, only in an inverted form; namely, the obscuring and repression of domination through the identity of reason and being. However, this leads to a paradox, according to Habermas, of the invocation of mimesis and the inability to present a theory of it, insofar as that would be subject to their critique of metaphysics:

The paradox in which the critique of instrumental reason is entangled, and which stubbornly resists even the most supple dialectic, consists then in this: Horkheimer and Adorno would have to put forward a *theory* of mimesis, which, according to their own ideas, is impossible.<sup>25</sup>

The paradox of a theory of mimesis ruins the possibility of Critical Theory, for Habermas, and reveals that it is only possible through ‘a theory’, which moreover, has the status of a science. The problem of mimesis therefore has the surprising consequence of a move towards philosophy insofar as it is a move away from science, despite its general problematisation of theory. Adorno’s critique of philosophy is suspended by his critique of science, leading to a re-legitimising of philosophy. Critical Theory becomes re-philosophized by default. This is contrasted with the programme of ‘interdisciplinary materialism’, which is understood by Habermas as the attempt to constitute a Critical Theory of society through the collective organization of, at least, those sciences needed for such a project. It does not challenge the

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<sup>24</sup> See section ‘From metaphysics to postmetaphysical thinking’ below.

<sup>25</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action* vol.1, p.382.

legitimacy of the sciences in their specificity, only in terms of their limits and in their orientation.<sup>26</sup>

Habermas identifies Adorno as the principal influence of this move of Critical Theory away from the sciences as a consequence of his greater scepticism about the sciences prior to *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. However, Habermas's diagnosis of Adorno is notably erroneous here. It symptomatically misreads Adorno's metaphorical depiction of sociology as a thief in the house of philosophy in his early essay 'The Actuality of Philosophy'.<sup>27</sup> The metaphor was originally Heidegger's and was, indeed, used to object to sociology's dissolution of philosophy. However, contrary to Habermas's interpretation, Adorno is criticising Heidegger through inverting the original intention of the metaphor and proposing the active adoption of this strategy of sociological thieving, rather than lamenting it. His qualification is that this dissolution of philosophy also transforms sociology.<sup>28</sup> This error is characteristic of Habermas's narration of Adorno's early confidence in philosophy, that is only later reduced

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<sup>26</sup> 'A philosophy that withdraws behind the lines of discursive thought to the 'mindfulness of nature' pays for the wakening powers of its exercises by renouncing the goal of theoretical knowledge, and thus by renouncing that programme of 'interdisciplinary materialism' in whose name the Critical Theory of society was once launched in the early thirties. Horkheimer and Adorno had already given up this goal by the beginning of the forties, without, however, acknowledging the practical consequences of relinquishing a connection to the social sciences...' Ibid. pp.385-6.

<sup>27</sup> 'In [Adorno's] inaugural lecture of 1931 he expressed this scepticism in the form of a parable in which sociology is assigned the role of a thief who steals treasures without realising their value.... Adorno's latter critique of positivism, which amounts to a total devaluation of social science, is already prefigured here.' Ibid. p.455.

<sup>28</sup> Adorno writes: 'I would be inclined to acknowledge the comparison and to interpret positively the function [Heidegger] gave sociology for philosophy. For the house, this big house, has long since decayed in its foundations and threatens not only to destroy all those inside it, but to cause all the things to vanish which are stored within it, much of which is irreplaceable.' Theodor W. Adorno, 'Die Aktualität der Philosophie', *Gesammelte Schriften* Bd.1 (Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1973), trans. B.Snow, 'The Actuality of Philosophy', *Telos* no.31 (1977), p.130.



to the melancholy of *Negative Dialectics*.<sup>29</sup> However, in 'The Actuality of Philosophy' the question is already 'whether philosophy is itself actual at all.'<sup>30</sup> *Negative Dialectics* is comparatively upbeat in its claim that 'Philosophy, which once seemed obsolete, lives on because the moment to realise it was missed.'<sup>31</sup> Habermas's assessments reveal a schematic and polemical engagement in the admittedly obscure problem of Adorno's concept of philosophy.

Habermas's further criticism of the problem of mimesis in early Critical Theory revolves around the horizon of reconciliation it generates. Again, this is characterised as a complex entwinement of Adorno and Horkheimer's critical concept of mimesis with a metaphysical horizon of the harmonious unity of man and nature, which Habermas seeks to displace more radically:

Horkheimer and Adorno are...guided by the idea of reconciliation; but they would rather renounce entirely any explication of it than fall into a *metaphysics* of reconciliation. As we saw, this leads them into the aporias of a critique that somehow retracts any claim to theoretical knowledge. The critique of instrumental reason

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<sup>29</sup> 'In 1931 Adorno still spoke confidently of the 'actuality of philosophy' because he still believed it capable of a polemical, non-affirmative grasp of a reality that preserves in vestiges and remnants the hope of someday arriving at a right and just reality. *Negative Dialectics* gives up this hope.'

Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action* vol.1, fn.28, p.452.

<sup>30</sup> Adorno, 'The Actuality of Philosophy', p.124. Adorno continues: 'Every philosophy which today does not depend on the security of current intellectual and social conditions, but instead on truth, sees itself facing the problem of the liquidation of philosophy.' Ibid. p.124.

<sup>31</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, Gesammelte Werke Bd.6, (Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1966,1977), p.15; trans. E.B.Ashton, *Negative Dialectics* (Routledge, London, 1973), p.3. On the relation of Adorno's early programme of 'The Actuality of Philosophy' and his subsequent concept of philosophy see section 'Programme: interpretation' in chapter 2, below.

conceptualised as negative dialectics renounces its theoretical claim while operating with the means of theory.<sup>32</sup>

The problem of metaphysics is diagnosed here as an entwinement with a philosophy of consciousness based on subject/object relations, which Habermas proposes to displace by the move to a theory of communicative action based on intersubjective relations, thereby abandoning the horizon of a reconciliation of man and nature via an intersubjective reconciliation between social agents. Here again the problem of philosophy emerges by default. Habermas recognises that Adorno rejects any straightforward recovery of metaphysics, but his failure to move to a paradigm of intersubjectivity is diagnosed as a failure to excise himself from the problems of metaphysics and pursue Habermas's postmetaphysical course. Adorno's critique of metaphysical reconciliation is suspended, despite itself.

Habermas further diagnoses the consequence of Adorno's aporetic concept of reconciliation as contributing to, rather than resolving, the political crisis that Critical Theory faced. The retention of an horizon of reconciliation between man and nature generates, according to Habermas, a utopianism, which trades the task of realising reconciliation with a resignation to mourning it. Its effect is to tie the political task of realising reconciliation – the horizon of human emancipation – to an inversion of Lukács's Left Hegelian philosophy of history; transforming the thesis of growing revolutionary potential for emancipation within capitalism's crisis, into the thesis of the decreasing revolutionary potential for emancipation. In the face of the historical defeats of universal human emancipation that were discerned through the experience of the Second World War and its aftermath – the tripartite phenomenon of Fascism, Stalinism and a newly conformist capitalism – Adorno's Critical Theory resigns

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<sup>32</sup> Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action* vol.1, pp.386-7.



itself to a utopian melancholy for reconciliation as a lost promise.<sup>33</sup> In this light, Adorno's preoccupation with art is interpreted as the social practice that leads from this disappointment. Proletarian politics is sublimated into the decaying experience of art by individuals who are sensitive to this lost promise.<sup>34</sup> Habermas's transformation of the

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<sup>33</sup> Axel Honneth has provided an extensive elaboration of Habermas's critique of Adorno's inverted or negative philosophy of history as follows: 'Adorno interprets fascism as the culmination point of a universal-historical process of reification. Should critical theory maintain its claim to historical reflexivity even in the consideration of this historical experience, so it will become a theory from "out of the fascist present, in which what is hidden comes to light." [*Dialectic of Enlightenment*] In the post-fascist period of reconstruction, as well, Adorno is certain of this historical constellation, in which the rational form of fascist domination first makes clear that the logic of historical development is one of increasing reification. As diverse as the argumentative threads of Adorno's philosophy may be, they all remain embedded in an historical-philosophical theory which, within its construction of history, treats the substantive historical experience of fascism as "regressive Anthropogenesis".' From, Axel Honneth, 'From Adorno to Habermas: On the Transformation of Critical Social Theory', trans. C.Wright, in *The Fragmented World of the Social: Essays in Social and Political Philosophy* (SUNY Press, New York, 1995), p.94.

Honneth claims that Adorno hereby departs from two versions of historical materialism: (1) contra the evolutionist version of the development of the forces of production, Adorno argues for the cumulative reification of nature and society; and (2) contra the left-Hegelian version of the emergence of proletarian social movement, Adorno argues for the emergence of increasing instrumentalisation.

<sup>34</sup> Honneth elaborates these political consequences as follows: 'Individual experiences of reconciliation with nature are not, like experiences of oppression in the workplace, subject to political organization. Nor are they, like the learning processes entailed in social reproduction, constitutive for socio-cultural reproduction. Adorno set the conditions for liberating praxis so high, that even theoretically they could no longer mediate at the level of the need and interest complexes of acting subjects. Political praxis, toward which the claims of Marxist theory, through the experiences of the proletarian masses, always remained oriented, is unthinkable for Adorno's critical theory. Though the mimetic comprehension of reality alone still creates the conditions for authentically critical insights into domination, these can then, however, only become objectified through individual artistic endeavour.'

Adorno can thus draw such conclusions from his philosophical-historical conception only if he gives up the self-imposed claim of Critical Theory to be directed toward the relations of political

problem of reconciliation into a problem of intersubjective communication between linguistically interacting social agents – suspending the problem of the exteriority or unknowability of nature – seeks to avoid this political resignation through making reconciliation immanent to intersubjective relations, thereby reviving the relation to collective politics through democratic deliberation between social subjects engaged in linguistically based interaction. The utopian dimension of political practice is thereby dissolved into pragmatically interacting speakers oriented towards agreement. However, this does not solve the problem of reconciliation posed by Adorno and Horkheimer or, for that matter, the problem of the emancipatory politics entwined with it. It simply changes the problem; moves to a new paradigm. It is therefore liable to the claim that it has simply abandoned the project of a more radical concept of human emancipation; and that, what is denigrated as utopianism in Adorno's development of Critical Theory, is also the denigration of a more radical political project of human emancipation, which characterises early Critical Theory fundamentally, and is retained, albeit mournfully, throughout Adorno's later writings. Habermas's integration of theory and practice proposed a resolution of the absence of this union in Adorno.<sup>35</sup> It therefore seemed to answer the objections of the New Left, that Adorno had resigned politics into a negative philosophy.<sup>36</sup> Adorno certainly did not write very concretely on problems of political organisation or strategy. But to recognise this must not lead to the misrecognition of the emancipatory dimension of Adorno's preoccupation with

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action. Since the connection with political praxis, which indeed is already always instrumental in form, would drag it into precisely the complex of reification which it opposes both by virtue of its philosophical content and by virtue of its literary form, Adorno disburdens his theory of every action orientation for the sake of preserving its critical power.' Ibid. pp.113-4.

<sup>35</sup> See for instance, Jürgen Habermas, *Theory and Praxis* (1971) trans. J. Viertel (Polity Press, Cambridge, 1988).

<sup>36</sup> See for instance, Hans-Jürgen Krahel, 'The Political Contradictions of Adorno's Critical Theory' (1969) trans. P. Murray and R. Heydebrand, *Telos* no.21, (1974), pp.164-7.



philosophy. As Adorno himself insisted in his response to the criticism that he had merely resigned from political demands into a negative philosophy, the distinction of theory and practice is indeed a recoil from their reconciliation insofar as it is not emancipatory but a premature short-circuiting of that promise. He therefore rebuked their claim emphatically, accusing them of displacing the transformatory resistance of thought with a ‘pseudo-activity’ that was itself a resignation.<sup>37</sup> For Adorno, as for Horkheimer and Marcuse, Critical Theory had inherited from the tradition of philosophy an emancipatory dimension that was crucial to its practical and political interests. Recovering this emancipatory dimension of philosophy from its denigration into resigned utopianism or metaphysics is the problem that ties Critical Theory to philosophy.

Habermas’s attempt to excise philosophy from Critical Theory threatens to dissolve this emancipatory dimension. But, insofar as he seeks to sustain this emancipatory dimension, he must negotiate the problem of philosophy as a problem of emancipatory critique. This is indeed what we see when we look at Habermas’s development of the concept of critique at stake in Critical Theory. Moreover, this reveals a noticeable transition in his understanding: from an emancipatory concept of human interests, to an increasingly normative or regulating concept<sup>of</sup> communication; that is, a move from a quasi-Nietzschean concept of emancipatory interests, to a neo-Kantian concept of regulating norms. This generates a preoccupation with the problem of grounding that threatens to dissolve the emancipatory dimension of critique. This transition is attended by an increasingly radical departure from Critical Theory’s debt to philosophy. Habermas’s critique of this debt in respect to Adorno, therefore emerges explicitly towards the end of this process as the result of this deeper engagement, which

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<sup>37</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, ‘Resignation’, trans. H.W. Pickford in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords* (Columbia University Press, New York, 1998), pp.289-94. See ‘Not praxis’ in chapter 3, below.

reveals a far more problematic relation to the problem of philosophy and Adorno than the schematic and polemical critique Habermas ultimately arrives at.

### **Excursus: From metaphysics to postmetaphysical thinking**

Habermas's critique of philosophy's tradition – that which is unredeemable within modernity – proceeds through a rejection of metaphysics. Habermas identifies metaphysics broadly with the development of an idealist ontology aimed at overcoming mythology. Following Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of metaphysics in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, he characterises it as part of a (failed) process of enlightenment, motivated in order to purge the fear of mythological powers.<sup>38</sup> However, Habermas understands this 'failure' of enlightenment differently from *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and the late Adorno. In contrast to the 'negative metaphysics' he attributes to Adorno<sup>39</sup>, he identifies his own project as 'postmetaphysical thinking'.

Habermas's definition of metaphysics emerges obliquely, through his critique of it. This identifies three principal characteristics: (1) Idealism: an ontology of form-giving 'ideas' that exist independently of empirical existence and which can only be apprehended in thought. (2) Identity thinking: the transformation of the mythic concept of narrative and intra-worldly unity, into a conceptual and extra-worldly (i.e. idealist) identification of everything with a singular origin. (3) *Bios theoretikos*, the philosophical life: an orientation in life

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<sup>38</sup> 'From Freud to Horkheimer and Adorno, the dialectic inherent in metaphysical enlightenment has been retraced. The spell of mythological powers and the enchantment of demons, which were supposed to be broken by the abstraction of universal, eternal, and necessary being, still live on in the idealistic triumph of the one over the many. The fear of uncontrolled dangers that displayed itself in the myths and magical practices now lodges within the controlling concepts of metaphysics itself.' Jürgen Habermas, 'The Unity of Reason in the Diversity of its Voices', in *Postmetaphysical Thinking: Philosophical Essays*, trans. W.M. Hohengarten (Polity Press, Cambridge, 1992), p.120.

<sup>39</sup> Jürgen Habermas, 'Themes in Postmetaphysical Thinking' in *Postmetaphysical Thinking*, p.28.



derived from an ontology that is purified of everyday illusions. These three characteristics are supplemented by a further, modern reconfiguration of metaphysics, which attempts to replace ontology with a metaphysics of consciousness. In Habermas' words, '*Prima philosophia* as philosophy of consciousness.'<sup>40</sup>

Habermas' concept of postmetaphysical thinking is articulated as a collection of projects that proceed from different aspects of the overcoming of metaphysics, which are partly the result of various problems internal to metaphysics that have structured its history.<sup>41</sup> Habermas identifies four projects of postmetaphysical thinking:

(1) Procedural rationality, as the overcoming of ontology: contra metaphysics's ontological constitution, Habermas claims that, as a result of the increasing autonomy of the sciences a new form of procedural reason has developed. This involves fallibilistic, methodological grounding, rather than the certain, ontological grounding characteristic of metaphysics.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Habermas, 'The Unity of Reason and the Diversity of its Voices', p.31.

<sup>41</sup> Habermas identifies the following: '[1]How can the one, without endangering its unity, be everything [*Alles*], if the universe [*das All*] is indeed composed of many different things?...[2]...whether idealism, which traces everything back to one and thereby devalues innerworldly beings to phenomena or images, can do justice to the integrity of the particular entity in its individuality and uniqueness....[3]Should matter, to which innerworldly beings owe their finitude, their concretion in space and time, and their resistance, be determined purely negatively as non-being?' Ibid. pp.120-3.

<sup>42</sup> '[For metaphysics,] rationality is thought of as being material, as a rationality that organizes the contents of the world, from which it can itself be read off. Reason is of the whole and of its parts.

In contrast, both modern empirical science and autonomous morality place their confidence solely in the rationality of their own approaches and their *procedures* – namely, in the method of scientific knowledge or in the abstract point of view under which moral insights are possible. Rationality [*Rationalität*] is reduced to something formal insofar as the rationality [*Vernünftigkeit*] of content evaporates into the validity of results.'

Habermas, 'Themes in Postmetaphysical Thinking', p.35.

The development of this new form of reason is elaborated by Habermas through the characterisation of 'reconstruction' [*Nachkonstruktion*] and 'reconstructive sciences'.

(2) The linguistic turn, as the overcoming of the residual metaphysics of philosophies of consciousness: contra the residually ontological claim of philosophies of consciousness, Habermas claims that the development of a theory of reason through the medium of language (understood as a medium of social interaction) provides a decisive break with the metaphysical tendencies of modern philosophies of consciousness. According to Habermas's intersubjectively conceived account, it clears away the residual appeal to ontology in the subject/object structure of consciousness and replaces it with a social relation of mutual understanding.

(3) Situated reason, as the overcoming of metaphysics' suppression of history and practice: contra metaphysics's transcendence of finitude and privileging of theory over practice, Habermas identifies the development of a project for a 'situated reason'. The historical dimension of this concept of reason is elaborated largely through the theory of modernity and the form of temporality it implies. Habermas identifies the postmetaphysical reversal of the privilege of theory over practice to find its ultimate expression through the emphasis on the pragmatic dimension of language use (as diagnosed by the late Wittgenstein and Austin). This leads to the development of a reconstructive science of the pragmatics of language, which finds its fullest expression in the theory of communicative action.

(4) 'Deflating the extra-ordinary', as a resolution of the antagonistic structure of modernity: this project is the attempt to resolve the antagonistic tendencies of modernity's separation of expert cultural spheres both from each other and from the everyday lifeworld. The task for postmetaphysical thinking is then what Habermas refers to as the 'project of modernity', namely, the mediation of this division in order to prevent it either collapsing or becoming alienated.



### *Emancipatory interests*

Habermas's outline of postmetaphysical thinking is the result of a transformation of metaphysics into critique, as the resolution of the crises of modern philosophy. This transformation is initially made in the name of an emancipatory dimension of critique that is noticeably suppressed by the time Habermas develops the programme of postmetaphysical thinking. The most fully developed elaboration of this emancipatory concept of critique as a Critical Theory of Society is developed in terms of a conception of emancipatory interests. This finds its most mature expression in his development of emancipatory cognitive (or knowledge-constitutive) interests.<sup>43</sup> Habermas proposes a reconfiguration of Horkheimer's differentiation of 'traditional' and 'critical' theory. Like Horkheimer, it emerges through a critique of positivism and Husserl's phenomenology. Unlike Horkheimer, it diagnoses a common prehistory to both 'traditional' and 'critical' theory in the classical concept of philosophy as the disciplining of life through theory: namely, the metaphysical doctrine of *bios theoretikos*, or the philosophical life. Theory (*theoria*) apprehends an immortal cosmos through ideas, which then enables the philosopher to distinguish mortal opinion (*doxa*) from

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<sup>43</sup> Peter Dews has pointed to three phases of development of Habermas's concept of critique. (1) Critique is understood as the identification of an anthropological emancipatory potential in human alienation. This is developed in 'Literaturbericht zur philosophischen Diskussion um Marx und dem Marxismus' (1957) in *Theorie und Praxis* (Luchterhand, Neuwied, Berlin, 1963). (2) Critique is developed as a diagnosis of an historical emancipatory potential in the crises of capitalist societies. This takes place in 'Between Philosophy and Science: Marxism as Critique' (1963) *Theory and Praxis* (Polity Press, Cambridge, 1988) pp.195-252. (3) Critique is developed as an epistemological potential in cognitive interests. This takes place in *Knowledge and Human Interests* (1968) trans. J.J.Shapiro (Heinemann, London, 1972). See Peter Dews 'Habermas and the Desublimation of Reason' *Habermas: A Critical Reader* (Blackwell, Oxford, 1999), pp.1-29. However, these stages are cumulative rather than exclusive. Therefore, the outline of cognitive interests is also conceived anthropologically and historically. The fundamental tension in Habermas's development of critique only develops with the distinction of critique from reconstruction (see sub-section '*From emancipation to reconstruction*', below).

immortal truth (*logos*) and, through this distinction, find a guide for life that would otherwise be deluded by opinion:

When the philosopher views the immortal order, he cannot help bringing himself into accord with the proportions of the cosmos and reproducing them internally. He manifests these proportions, which he sees in the motions of nature and the harmonic series of music, within himself: he forms himself through mimesis. Through the soul's likening itself to the ordered motion of the cosmos, theory enters the conduct of life. In *ethos* theory moulds life to its form and is reflected in the conduct of those who subject themselves to its discipline.<sup>44</sup>

In a more sympathetic characterization of phenomenology than Horkheimer had allowed in 'Traditional and Critical Theory', Habermas contends that both Husserl's phenomenology and critical theory present a critique of positivism through the recovery of what positivism represses in its departure from the classical concept of philosophy; namely, the interests of life that are fused with the interests of knowledge. Classical philosophy combines life and knowledge in an ideal or immortal ontology. Positivism attempts to eradicate the prejudices of life from a purely objective or value-free knowledge, thereby simultaneously distinguishing itself from classical philosophy and threatening to repeat it blindly, by suppressing the extent to which interests in life permeate the project of value-free knowledge. Husserl's phenomenology seeks to counter positivism through the renewal of classical philosophy, acquiring its significance for life through the purification of theory from its mortal interests. However, Habermas regards this purified model of theory to be directly continuous with positivism. In other words, positivism's collapse of the relation of life and theory into a theory indifferent to life, is already implicit in the purist conception of theory in

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<sup>44</sup> Jürgen Habermas, 'Knowledge and Human interests: A General Perspective', in *Knowledge and Human Interests*, trans. J.J.Schapiro (Heinemann, London, 1972), pp.301-2.



metaphysics. Husserl's phenomenology is continuous with this purism. Moreover, phenomenology's 'transcendental' departure from the cosmological status of theory tends to further undermine its capacity to reconstitute the life-transforming dimension of philosophy, since it is precisely theory's cosmological status that constitutes its life-forming significance. Habermas's proposal for critical theory is to counter positivism by abandoning the project of a pure theory and making the interests which motivate knowledge explicit as a constitutive and irreducible component of knowledge:

Contrary to Husserl's expectations, objectivism is eliminated not through the power of renewed *theoria* but through demonstrating what it conceals: the connection of knowledge and interest. Philosophy remains true to its classical tradition by renouncing it. The insight that the truth of statements is linked in the last analysis to the intention of the good and true life can be preserved today only on the ruins of ontology. However, even this philosophy remains a speciality alongside the sciences and outside public consciousness as long as the heritage that it has critically abandoned lives on in the positivistic self-understanding of the sciences.<sup>45</sup>

Habermas identifies three fundamental cognitive interests, which correspond to three different disciplines of knowledge or sciences: (1) Empirical-analytical sciences, dominated by a technical cognitive interest; (2) Historical-hermeneutic sciences, dominated by a practical cognitive interest; (3) Critical sciences, dominated by an emancipatory cognitive interest. The emancipatory cognitive interest of critical sciences is understood as a form of self-reflection in which the subject reflects on the powers it depends on, in order to establish whether that dependence is illusory and whether it can be transformed. According to Habermas, self-reflection hereby provides a redemption of the emancipatory constitution of classical philosophy without aspiring to theory purified of interest, since it admits to this

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid. pp.316-7.

emancipatory constitution as an interest, rather than trying to suppress or deny it as such.<sup>46</sup>

This emancipatory interest is understood as the aspiration towards autonomy or responsibility (*Mündigkeit*) and therefore with the project of enlightenment outlined by Kant.<sup>47</sup> Examples of such sciences are identified as Marx's critique of ideology and Freud's psychoanalysis.<sup>48</sup>

Habermas identifies a further crucial respect in which self-reflection redeems the classical concept of philosophy. If self-reflection on knowledge-constitutive interests does not propose itself as pure theory, neither does it propose the blind pursuit of interests. Rather it reflects critically on the interests of knowledge, albeit with a view to emancipation.<sup>49</sup> As such, self-reflection recovers the critique of illusory dependencies pursued in the classical concept of philosophy as a guide to the good life, but without appealing to pure theory and thereby risking dogmatism. Self-reflection hereby provides a new postmetaphysical medium for the classical task of philosophy.

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<sup>46</sup> '...as long as philosophy remains caught in ontology, it is itself subject to an objectivism that disguises the connection of its knowledge with the human interest in autonomy and responsibility [*Mündigkeit*]. There is only one way in which it can acquire the power that it vainly claims for itself in virtue of its seeming freedom from presuppositions: by acknowledging its dependence on this interest and turning against its own illusion of pure theory the critique it directs at the objectivism of the sciences.' Ibid. p.311.

<sup>47</sup> See Immanuel Kant, 'An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?' trans. T.Humphrey *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays* (Hackett Publishing Co., Indianapolis, Cambridge, 1983), pp.41-8.

<sup>48</sup> On Marx's critique of ideology and Freud's psychoanalysis as critical sciences see Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, chapters 2&3, and 10&11, respectively.

<sup>49</sup> '...it is always illusory to suppose an autonomy, free from presuppositions, in which knowing first grasps reality theoretically, only to be taken subsequently into the service of interests alien to it. But the mind can always reflect back upon the interest structure that joins subject and object a priori: this is reserved to self-reflection. If the latter cannot cancel out interest, it can to a certain extent make up for it.' Ibid. pp.313-4.



*From emancipation to reconstruction*

Motivated by various criticisms, Habermas revised this account of critique in recognition of its conflation of two distinct disciplines, one of which he identifies as properly critique and the other which he identifies as 'reconstruction'.<sup>50</sup> Ostensibly, this provides a self-critical attempt to clarify his ambiguous use of the concept of reflection within his theory of cognitive interests. However, it also introduces new questions about the emancipatory dimension of critique; questions which introduce a limitation upon or reduction of the emancipatory claims of critique. Habermas discerns two distinct concepts in his development of self-reflection: 1) the revealing of conditions of possibility; 2) the revealing of illusory constraints:

...on the one hand, it denotes the reflection upon the conditions of potential abilities of a knowing, speaking and acting subject as such; on the other hand, it denotes the reflection upon the unconsciously produced constraints to which a determinate subject (or a determinate group of subjects, or a determinate species subject) succumbs in its process of self-formation.<sup>51</sup>

Habermas identifies the first concept of reflection with 'reconstruction' [*Nachkonstruktion*]. Reconstruction is identified broadly with the discipline of establishing the conditions of possibility for knowledge as it is practiced in Kant's 'transcendental deduction'. However, Habermas understands reconstruction to have a fallibilistic rather than strictly transcendental status. Reconstruction is based on empirically alterable assumptions and, consequently, cannot claim the status of universal necessity. This distinction produces a distinction between two types of discipline: reconstructive sciences and empirical-analytical sciences.

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<sup>50</sup> This differentiation is first introduced in Jürgen Habermas, 'A Postscript to *Knowledge and Human Interests*' (1971), trans. C. Lenhardt, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, pp. 351-86.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. p. 377.

Reconstructive sciences elaborate the presuppositions of knowledge as it is established by the empirical sciences. Alterations in the character of this knowledge may demand revisions of its presuppositional structure. Reconstruction is therefore a fallibilistically modified resumption of Kant's transcendental deduction.<sup>52</sup>

Habermas's definition of 'critique' is now differentiated from 'reconstruction', as those aspects of emancipatory cognitive interest that are excluded from reconstruction. Habermas identifies three principal distinctions between critique and reconstruction.<sup>53</sup> Habermas does not intend an indifferent separation of critique and reconstruction. He maintains that critical sciences need reconstructive sciences in order to establish the normative basis on which critique can be justified.<sup>54</sup> However, this separation threatens to

<sup>52</sup> 'Kant had to separate empirical from transcendental analysis sharply. If we now understand transcendental investigation in the sense of a reconstruction of general and unavoidable presuppositions of experiences that lay claim to objectivity, then there certainly remains a difference between reconstructive and empirical-analytical analysis. But the distinction between drawing on a priori knowledge and drawing on a posteriori knowledge becomes blurred.'

Jürgen Habermas, 'What is Universal Pragmatics?', *Communication and the Evolution of Society* trans. T. McCarthy (Polity Press, Cambridge, 1984), p.24.

<sup>53</sup> Habermas makes three distinctions: '[1] Criticism is brought to bear on objects of experience whose pseudo-objectivity is to be revealed, whereas reconstructions are based on 'objective' data like sentences, actions, cognitive insights, etc., which are conscious creations of the subject from the very beginning. [2] Criticism is brought to bear on something particular – concretely speaking, on the particular self-formative process of an ego, or group, identity – whereas reconstructions try to understand anonymous systems of rules which can be followed by any subject at all provided it has requisite competences. [3] Criticism is characterised by its ability to make unconscious elements conscious in a way which has practical consequences. Criticism changes the determinants of *false* consciousness, whereas reconstructions explicate correct knowledge, i.e. the intuitive knowledge we acquire when we possess rule-competence, *without* involving *practical* consequences.'

Habermas, 'A Postscript to *Knowledge and Human Interests*' p.378.

<sup>54</sup> 'The critical sciences such as 'psychoanalysis and social theory also depend on being able to reconstruct successfully general rules of competence. To give an example, a universal pragmatic capable of understanding the conditions of why linguistic communication is at all possible has to be



dissolve Habermas's critique of pure theory, instituting a renewed form of pure theory as reconstruction, which undermines the emancipatory dimension of critique.<sup>55</sup> Nonetheless, Habermas maintains that the threat of pure theory is avoided by the fallibilistic constitution of reconstruction. Moreover, with the turn to a linguistically based concept of reason, Habermas maintains that reconstruction suspends the remnants of ontology. *The Theory of Communicative Action* combines these considerations: a reconstruction of linguistically based social interaction, which produces a practically infused theory of reason, and thereby a normative basis for the emancipatory interest in the critique of systematically distorted social interaction.

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the theoretical basis for explaining systematically distorted communication and deviant processes of socialization.' Ibid. p.379.

<sup>55</sup> This problem is identified by Thomas McCarthy:

'In trying to do justice to the theoretical character of theory (rational reconstructions as 'pure' knowledge) and the practical character of practice (critique as bound to the system of action and experience), Habermas seems to have reintroduced the gap between theory and practice, between reason and emancipation that *Knowledge and Human Interests* tried to close. More specifically, if it is only reflection in the sense of critique that pursues a direct interest in liberation from the self-deception embedded in systematically distorted communication; and if the identification of reason (in its purest form) with reflection makes sense only if reflection is understood as the reconstruction of the universal presuppositions of speech and action, then it seems to follow that the interest in emancipation is not proper to reason as such but only to a particular employment of reason: critical self-reflection. 'Transcendental' reflection appears to be an exception to the 'interest-ladenness' of cognition; it pursues neither the technical, the practical, nor the emancipatory interests. It is, in this sense, 'interest-free' – and we are back to something like the traditional notion of disinterested reason. Or, at most, it pursues an interest in the completion of transcendental reflection itself – and we are back to something like a 'pure' interest in explicating the implicit presuppositions of reason. In either case the radical claims of the theory of cognitive interests would have to be considerably trimmed.'

Thomas McCarthy, *The Critical Theory of Jürgen Habermas* (MIT Press, Cambridge Ma., London, 1979), pp.101-2.

However, the problem is more fundamental. With the insistence on normatively grounding emancipatory interests through reconstruction, the emancipatory dimension is reduced to the immanence of the present. Its transcending aspect is thereby disqualified as a metaphysical illusion or reduced to a purely regulative ideal: the ideal communicative community. It is with this insistence on grounding that Habermas truly breaks with the emancipatory conception of early Critical Theory, which had self-consciously presented itself as a form of critique with a radical claim on the realisation of a future, which, as a claim on the future, could not ground itself.

### *Modernism*

Habermas's modification of the concept of critique through reconstruction is combined with a modification of the diagnosis of the conditions of crisis for metaphysics. This emerges through a theory of modernity which combines a form of temporal self-consciousness, a particular articulation of social institutions, and 'a project of modernity' as a practical task in which the problematic experiences of modernity are articulated in terms of its social institutions.<sup>56</sup> Habermas's criticism of philosophy is orchestrated by the identification of metaphysics as a fundamentally pre-modern or traditional cultural form, which is inconsistent with the conditions of modernity. Consequently, his aim is to develop a specifically modern philosophy, which is thereby 'postmetaphysical'.

This intermeshing of the question of philosophy with the question of modernity is partly orchestrated by two philosophical sources. Firstly, Kant's dissolution of metaphysics's substantive and unified concept of reason into the three autonomous value spheres of

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<sup>56</sup> See Habermas, 'Modernity's Consciousness of Time and Its Need for Self-Reassurance' in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, pp.1-23; and, 'Modernity – An Incomplete Project', in ed. H.Foster, *Postmodern Culture* (Bay Press, New York, 1983; Pluto Press, London, 1985), pp.3-15.



scientific, moral and aesthetic reason, which Habermas associates with Weber's theory of modern rationalisation. Secondly, Hegel's centralization of the problem of time to philosophy and the radicalisation and crisis of this project among the Young Hegelians, which Habermas regards as the emergence of the self-consciousness of modernity. For this reason Habermas maintains that we remain contemporaries of the Young Hegelians. Habermas's account of modernity is therefore articulated in two registers: as a temporally infused category of social experience (brought to philosophical self-consciousness with Hegel and with Baudelaire instituting its decisively aesthetic determination); and, as a structural articulation of modern society (derived predominantly from Weber, with Kant as its philosophical progenitor). The first register identifies various constituent elements: an immanence or openness to the future (the new); a totalisation of history (Habermas notes that the collective singular *Geschichte* is coined in 18<sup>th</sup> century); the quasi-autonomous identification of time as a unified and progressive process, raising its own problems;<sup>and</sup> the need for legitimation independently from tradition, that is, the need to create norms out of the present. Complementing this account is Habermas's debt to Weber's account of rationalization in the constitution of modern western societies. This describes the secularisation of religious worldviews through the development of three relatively autonomous spheres of culture, each with their own inner logics. These cultural spheres are empirical science, morality and law grounded on principle, and autonomous art. Habermas's reception of this account also identifies the further differentiation of the general system of these value spheres from the realm of assumed or unconscious activities of everyday life, which he refers to as the 'lifeworld'.

This structural description<sup>of</sup> modernity generates the conditions of the 'project of modernity', which Habermas associates broadly with the project of Enlightenment pursued by the 18<sup>th</sup> century *philosophes*. This is the attempt to reconcile the antagonistic tendencies of modern societies, without repressing them in the assertion of post-modernity or regressing to

pre-modernity. These programmes of repression or regression outline a series of theoretical-political opponents.<sup>57</sup> The primary antagonism that needs to be resolved is the alienation of the expert value spheres from each other and from the lifeworld.<sup>58</sup> The need to negotiate this antagonism, without collapsing the differentiation of the value spheres from each other or the lifeworld, reveals the project of modernity as a task of Critical Theory. The postmetaphysical role of philosophy is central to this project of modernity. However, the debilitating effect that the introduction of reconstruction has on the emancipatory dimension of critique can be seen in Habermas's diagnosis of philosophy's relation to this project in the dual roles of 'stand-in' and 'interpreter' corresponding to reconstruction and critique, respectively.<sup>59</sup>

In contrast to the dual roles of supreme judge and usher [*Platzanweiser*] that philosophy holds for Kant – judging the limitations and capacities of different activities and ushering them to their different activities or proper places accordingly – Habermas insists that philosophy can no longer plausibly claim the superior access to reason that would enable it to fulfil these roles. However, contrary to more anti-rationalist critics (like Rorty), he claims that philosophy can continue to provide a seminal role in preserving a secular concept of reason

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<sup>57</sup> Habermas identifies 3 opponents to his project of modernity: young conservatives (aesthetic/dynamic anti-modernists); old conservatives (serenely indifferent to modernity); neo-conservatives (dystopian neutralisers of the need to reconcile modernity's antagonisms). See, Habermas, 'Modernity – An Incomplete Project', p.14.

<sup>58</sup> 'The project [of modernity] aims at a differentiated relinking of modern culture with an everyday praxis that still depends on vital heritages, but would be impoverished through mere traditionalism. This new connection, however, can only be established under the condition that societal modernization will also be steered in a different direction. The lifeworld has to become able to develop institutions out of itself which set limits to the internal dynamics and imperatives of an almost autonomous economic system and its administrative complements.' Ibid. p.13.

<sup>59</sup> See Habermas, 'Themes in Postmetaphysical Thinking'; and Jürgen Habermas, 'Philosophy as Stand-in and Interpreter' (1983) trans. C.Lenhardt, *After Philosophy: End or Transformation* eds. K.Baynes, J.Bohman and T.McCarthy (MIT Press, Cambridge, Ma., London, 1987), pp.296-318.



by taking on the more modest roles of interpreter and stand-in [*Interpret und Platzhalter*]. These dual roles are proposed in order to negotiate the relative autonomy of the various spheres of modern society. On the one hand, Habermas claims that, with the dissolution of its substantive medium of reason, philosophy can no longer legitimately claim any privilege over the sciences and must submit itself to their fallibilistic procedures. However, in doing so Habermas claims that philosophy remains legitimate in its tendency to pose questions universalistically, both in questioning the delimitations of a reductive division of scientific labour and developing the quasi-transcendental conditions of empirical objects of study.<sup>60</sup> This postmetaphysical function of philosophy is therefore a ‘stand-in’ for empirical theories with strong universalistic claims, which might otherwise not be able to develop their universal dimensions. This role is supplemented by the role of interpreter, which assumes the residual function of emancipatory critique. However, this emancipatory dimension of critique is now understood in severely limited terms within the structural conditions of modernity. Habermas claims that interpretation attains a critical role through the transformation of philosophy’s metaphysical concern with totality, into a concern with the pre-theoretical totality of the lifeworld. This role is justified and required because of the antagonistic relation of the lifeworld with the system of expert cultures that Habermas identifies as characteristic of modern societies. Because he does not think their basic differentiation can be dissolved

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<sup>60</sup> ‘Philosophy has to implicate itself in the fallibilistic self-understanding and procedural rationality of the empirical sciences; it may not lay claim to a privileged access to truth, or to a method, an object realm, or even just a style of intuition that is specifically its own. Only thus can philosophy contribute its best to a nonexclusive division of labour, namely, its persistent tenacity in posing questions universalistically, and its procedure of rationally reconstructing the intuitive pre-theoretical knowledge of competently speaking, acting, and judging subjects – yet in such a way that Platonic anamnesis sheds its non-discursive character. This dowry recommends philosophy as an indispensable partner in the collaboration of those who are concerned with a theory of rationality.’

Habermas, ‘Themes in Postmetaphysical Thinking’, p.38.

altogether without regression, he proposes that it requires mediation, in order to prevent their destructive conflation or alienation. This role of mediation, which involves the attempt to redeem the critical claims of the lifeworld, is postmetaphysical philosophy's role of interpreter.<sup>61</sup>

Habermas's account of the role of interpreter shows that emancipatory critique is now understood strictly in terms of the immanence of his account of modernity, which functions normatively as a secular limit on legitimate critique. Critical claims are reduced to everyday complaints of alienation which appear to have lost their claim to truth and which are posed in a form that is strictly delimited by their immanence to established scientific validity. This imposes a further normative limitation to critique. However, as Peter Dews has argued, the role of interpreter demands a more ambitious job than Habermas allows.<sup>62</sup> Habermas's

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<sup>61</sup> '...the lifeworld is always already intuitively present to all of us as a totality that is unproblematicized, non-objectified, and pre-theoretical – as the sphere of that which is daily taken for granted, the sphere of common sense. In an awkward way, philosophy has always been closely affiliated with the latter. Like it, philosophy moves within the vicinity of the lifeworld; its relation to the totality of this receding horizon of everyday knowledge is similar to that of common sense. And yet, through the subversive power of reflection and of illuminating, critical and dissecting analysis, philosophy is completely opposed to common sense. By virtue of this intimate yet fractured relation to the lifeworld, philosophy is also well suited for a role on *this side* of the scientific system – for the role of interpreter mediating between the expert cultures of science, technology, law, and morality on the one hand, and everyday communicative practices on the other hand, and indeed in a manner similar to that in which literary and art criticism mediate between art and life. Of course, the lifeworld with which philosophy maintains a type of non-objectifying contact is not to be confused with the totality of the universal one, of which metaphysics wished to provide an image or, more precisely, a worldview. Postmetaphysical thinking operates with a different concept of the world.' Ibid. pp.38-9.

<sup>62</sup> 'As the younger Critical Theorist Martin Seel has put the issue, does the lifeworld exhibit an *illusory integration* of dimensions of rationality, which is exposed as such by their modern institutional separation? Or is it, rather, the integration of the lifeworld which reveals the *illusory separation* of rationality dimensions characteristic of specialized cultures of expertise?'

Dews, 'Habermas and the Desublimation of Reason', p.15.



criticism of various contemporary philosophical projects in terms of their refusal to submit to scientific validity, should be modified to recognise the extent to which they are actually attempting to pursue the role of interpreter in a more ambitious way, as a 'discloser of possibilities and truths'.<sup>63</sup> It is this disclosive capacity, however problematic, that is essential to critique's emancipatory dimension as it is developed in Adorno's Critical Theory. It is this aspect that can still be discerned, suppressed within Habermas's development of the project of modernity and which leads us to a reconsideration of Adorno and the problem of philosophy.

Habermas's critique of Adorno's re-philosophization of Critical Theory concerns the character of Adorno's critique of philosophy, the form of philosophy's self-criticism or self-negation, and the effect this has on Habermas's understanding of a Critical Theory of society. As such, it concerns a pathology of modern thought that Habermas obliquely diagnoses within modernism, as one of 'The False Programmes of the Negation of Culture.'<sup>64</sup> Habermas diagnoses this pathology in relation to the aesthetic modernism of the surrealists. He claims that their attempt to destroy the separation of art and life, resulted in two misconceptions which doomed their programme: a non-emancipatory negation of an alienating social form (art); and the negation of a limited social form as if it were the totality. Both result in an increasing alienation of modern life, according to Habermas, since they thereby fail to mediate the antagonistic structure of modernity. It is in this sense that they are 'false negations of culture'.<sup>65</sup> Habermas goes on to identify similar false programmes of negation, in particular the Marxist negation of philosophy:

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid. p.22.

<sup>64</sup> Habermas, 'Modernity – An Incomplete Project', p.11.

<sup>65</sup> 'First, when the containers of an autonomously developed cultural sphere [namely, art] are shattered, the contents get dispersed. Nothing remains from a desublimated meaning or a destructured form; an emancipatory effect does not follow. Their second mistake has more important

In the spheres of theoretical knowledge and morality, there are parallels to this failed attempt of what we might call the false negation of culture. Only they are less pronounced. Since the days of the Young Hegelians, there has been talk about the negation of philosophy. Since Marx, the question of the relationship of theory and practice has been posed. However, Marxist intellectuals joined a social movement; and only at its peripheries were there sectarian attempts to carry out a programme of the negation of philosophy similar to the surrealist programme to negate art. A parallel to the surrealist mistakes becomes visible in these programmes when one observes the consequences of dogmatism and moral rigorism.<sup>66</sup>

What is indicated here is a problem that defines Habermas's relation to Adorno: the problem of philosophical modernism as a problem of anti-philosophy. Habermas's critique of Adorno's philosophy is that it is a false negation of science (an anti-science) and not that it is false negation of philosophy.<sup>67</sup> But the problem of anti-philosophy is not merely its relation to science. It concerns the need for a cultural tradition covering all spheres, since, it is Habermas's principal objection to Adorno that philosophy ruins the division of spheres insofar as it makes a metaphysical claim on totality. The negative form of Adorno's modernist philosophy, like that of the artistic avant-gardes, challenges the division of labour within Habermas's account of the tripartite form of modern reason and its institutionalisation. The problem of philosophy is that it traverses this tripartite division of value spheres. As

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consequences. In everyday communication, cognitive meanings, moral expectations, subjective expressions and evaluations must relate to one another. Communication processes need a cultural tradition covering all spheres – cognitive, moral-practical and expressive. A rationalized everyday life, therefore, could hardly be saved from cultural impoverishment through breaking open a single cultural sphere – art – and so providing access to just one of the specialized knowledge complexes. The surrealist revolt would have replaced only one abstraction.' Ibid. p.11.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid. p.11.

<sup>67</sup> See section 'Non-philosophy/anti-philosophy' in chapter 3, below.



metaphysics, it is destructive of it and, consequently for Habermas, belongs to a pre-modern or traditional culture. However, as he also indicates here, there nevertheless remains the need for a discourse on the totality of modernity, precisely in order to avoid the false negation of culture. It is in this function that philosophy's apparently outmoded claim of totality retains its relevance. Habermas acknowledges this in the identification of philosophy with the role of interpreter that would mediate the disputes between the value spheres. However, the role of interpreter is not able to provide this discourse insofar as it is limited to a purely meditative function. Ironically, Habermas's description of the structural formation of modernity determines the total structure of society and legitimate forms of its criticism, in a way that the roles he outlines for philosophy are formally delimited from. The persistence of the need for such a discourse, albeit negatively conceived, indicates the continuing relevance of Adorno's concept of philosophy.

## Chapter 2

### Problem

The analysis of Adorno's philosophy is faced with a number of immediate problems which appear to obstruct posing it as a direct object of investigation. Adorno explicitly rejects attempts to grasp philosophy in a definition or thesis, even in a position or method:

'philosophy is essentially not reportable [*referierbar*]. If it were it would be superfluous: the fact that most of it can be reported speaks against it.'<sup>1</sup> Questioning what philosophy is, as such, is liable to the accusation that it seeks such a misapprehension of its object; that direct grasping at it violates it, destroying what is sought; or, that the attempt to determine philosophy subjects it to considerations that are not properly philosophical. Adorno's warning is however a condition, not a taboo on the examination of philosophy. It is intended as a clarification of the type of 'object' philosophy is, such that it cannot simply be grasped like a discrete object. This recognition contributes to, rather than inhibits, the task of questioning what philosophy is. Indeed, Adorno's writings are characterised by the combination of this sensitivity to the misapprehension of philosophy and a direct and extensive questioning of it, which has often been accused of sociologism or historicism. For Adorno's warning to be interpreted as a taboo, would cast a dark shadow over the claims to enlightenment that, for Adorno at least, are central to it. Philosophy's claim to be a discipline of critical self-reflection, even the most eminent such discipline, would be limited by the absence of its own critical self-reflection. Its claim to critique would be made either dogmatically or mystically.

The problem of examining Adorno's idea of philosophy is the fundamental problem of metaphilosophy; the problem that metaphilosophy must work on in determinate examples.

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<sup>1</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, p.44/Translation pp.33-4.



The question of what philosophy is as such, involves a totalisation of philosophy, which objectifies philosophy in terms of its constitutive elements and limits. It therefore contradicts philosophy's claim to be absolute. This contradiction creates a controversy over metaphilosophy as a legitimate discipline. Its central question threatens to destroy philosophy, at least as it is traditionally conceived. But without it, philosophy's legitimacy cannot be tested and it remains essentially traditional, deriving its legitimacy from the past rather than the present or future. Metaphilosophy revolves around the paradox that its objectification of philosophy threatens either to depart from philosophy altogether, or leave it unquestioned in its most fundamental constitution.<sup>2</sup> This paradox is not an obstacle, but a task in the emphatic sense: namely, that which cannot prove itself independently of its enactment or performance. With the ubiquity of metaphilosophical ventures, Friedrich Schlegel's old contention that, 'Nothing is more rarely the subject of philosophy than philosophy itself'<sup>3</sup>, appears obsolete. Read ironically, however, it reveals a criticism of the very idea of metaphilosophy as authentically philosophical. Its criticism should be taken as the fundamental challenge and task of metaphilosophy: a philosophical critique of philosophy.

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<sup>2</sup> Louis Althusser has drawn attention to this problem of metaphilosophy: '...whilst it is indispensable to leave philosophy in order to understand it, we must guard against the illusion of being able to provide a definition – that is, a knowledge – of philosophy that would be able *radically* to escape from philosophy: there is no possibility of achieving a science of philosophy or a 'meta-philosophy'.... There is no objective discourse about philosophy that is not itself philosophical, and therefore a discourse based upon certain positions *within* philosophy.'

Louis Althusser, 'Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists', in *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists* trans. Ben Brewster, et al (Verso, 1990), pp.101-2.

<sup>3</sup> Friedrich Schlegel, 'Athenaeum Fragments' (no.1) in *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. P.Firchow, (University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p.18.

Adorno, who makes no use of the term ‘metaphilosophy’, is nonetheless exemplary for the elaboration of its central problem. Adorno is bound to a profound critique of philosophy in terms of its limits and possible end, without treating it as a discrete object. This problem unfolds Adorno’s idea of philosophy, which emerges through its self-criticism. It involves a hermeneutic circle, in which the word or concept of philosophy is a clue or sign of philosophy, but not philosophy itself. There is no definition of philosophy in Adorno, in the sense of an axiom that could be established independently of philosophy’s practice. This is not simply because philosophy is particularly obscure or difficult to define, even though it is. But because resistance to definition is itself a quality of philosophy, of its way of relating to its objects and, not least, to itself.<sup>4</sup> The very attempt to define philosophy must negotiate the suspicion that it presupposes a fundamental misapprehension of its object; that the only definitions of philosophy are, by definition, not philosophical. Producing a philosophical definition of philosophy, which casts its shadow over the whole project of metaphilosophy, proves to be particularly intransigent.<sup>5</sup> Adorno’s solution to the problem of a philosophical definition of philosophy is to reveal the distinctive nature of philosophical language or terminology as the medium of philosophy. This introduces a quasi-philological dimension to philosophy, through which the historical truth of terms is established.<sup>6</sup> The term ‘philosophy’ is, in a sense, merely one of the objects through which the philosophical interpretation of the truth content of language is established. Philosophy is elaborated as the simultaneous object

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<sup>4</sup> See section ‘Excursus: Kant’s critique of dogmatism’ in chapter 4, below.

<sup>5</sup> Louis Althusser, who proposed a series of definitions of philosophy, was under no illusions about this when he characterized his preoccupation as ‘a non-philosophical theory of philosophy.’ See, Louis Althusser, ‘Lenin and Philosophy’ in *Lenin and Philosophy: And Other Essays*, trans. B.Brewster, (New Left Books, 1971), p.27.

<sup>6</sup> This metaphilosophical discipline is proposed in the early text ‘Thesen über die Sprache des Philosophen’ GS. Bd.1 (Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1973), pp.366-371; and elaborated extensively in *Philosophische Terminologie*, 2 vols. (Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1973).



and method of this practice. This attempts to evade the performative contradiction of defining philosophy in a manner that is alien to the object of philosophy.<sup>7</sup>

Adorno's reflection on the concept of philosophy often appears as a reflection on method.<sup>8</sup> However, his understanding of the relation of philosophy and method must be distinguished from other conceptions of philosophy as method, which he rejects emphatically. Adorno rejects the identification of philosophy with the establishment of a transcendental method; that is, the establishment of a set of formal but necessary conditions of possibility for knowledge or truth.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, he rejects a weaker or quasi-transcendental doctrine of method as a set of formal, but historically variable conditions. He also rejects the even weaker, but structurally similar model of philosophy as the methodological examination and clarification of the existing sciences, whatever their character. Adorno therefore rejects the move to methodological or 'procedural reason' proposed by Habermas as the fate of philosophy.<sup>10</sup> What typifies these models and Adorno's critique of them, is their establishment of method independently of its application. In this, Adorno follows Hegel's critique of Kant's critical philosophy as an instrumental form of

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<sup>7</sup> This strategy echoes Hegel's negotiation of writing a history of philosophy without subordinating philosophy to the object of another discipline, thereby treating it instrumentally or heteronymously: '...when the concept of philosophy is established, not arbitrarily but in a scientific way, such a treatment becomes the science of philosophy itself.'

G.W.F.Hegel, 'Inaugural Address', in *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, vol.1, trans. E.S. Haldane & F.H. Simson (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1892,1955), p.xvi.

<sup>8</sup> As Adorno writes in the 'Preface' to *Negative Dialectics*: 'A methodology of the author's material works is not all there is to this book; no continuum exists between those works and it, according to the theory of negative dialectics.' p.xix.

<sup>9</sup> This has been rightly emphasised by Jarvis: '...Adorno formulated his thinking as a *critical thinking without transcendental method*.' Simon Jarvis, *Adorno: A Critical Introduction* (Polity, Cambridge, 1998), p.148.

<sup>10</sup> See section 'Excursus: From metaphysics to postmetaphysical thinking' in chapter 1, above.

cognition, formulated classically in *Phenomenology of Spirit*.<sup>11</sup> Hegel's anti-formalism becomes, for Adorno, a model for the very possibility of philosophy.<sup>12</sup> But, Hegel's critique of Kant's development of an instrument (an organon) of cognition prior to cognition must be measured by his own declaration of method: speculative method. Indeed, Hegel distinguishes himself from the radical or complete rejection of method, which he associates with Jacobi et al.<sup>13</sup> Adorno rejects Hegel's proposal of a total philosophy as the alternative to this critique of transcendental philosophy. As a consequence, despite Adorno's rejection of the identification of philosophy with methodology, he cannot absolve philosophy from its residually methodological character, even though it has this absolutism as its ideal.<sup>14</sup> Despite Adorno's

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<sup>11</sup> See 'Preface' and 'Introduction' of G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1977), pp.1-58.

<sup>12</sup> 'Unless the idealistically acquired concept of dialectics harbours experiences contrary to the Hegelian emphasis, experiences independent of the idealistic machinery, philosophy must inevitably do without substantive insight, confine itself to the methodology of the sciences [*Methodik der Wissenschaften*], call that philosophy, and virtually cross itself out.' Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, p.19/Translation pp.7-8.

<sup>13</sup> Referring to 'immediate knowing' Hegel writes: 'On the one hand, this modern standpoint changes nothing in the method of ordinary scientific cognition that was initiated by Descartes, and the sciences of what is empirical and finite that have originated from that method are carried on by it in exactly the same way. But on the other hand, it rejects this method, and hence *all* methods, since it does not know of any other method [appropriate] for the knowing of what is infinite in import.'

G.W.F. Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic*, trans. T.F. Geraets, W.A. Suchting and H.S. Harris (Hackett, Indianapolis, Cambridge, 1991), p.123.

<sup>14</sup> 'The remnant of divergence between philosophical conception [*Konzeption*] and execution [*Durchführung*], ... also denotes some of the non-identity that allows the method neither quite to absorb the contents – though it is supposed to be in the contents alone – nor to immaterialise them. The precedence of the matter shows that as a necessary insufficiency of the method. What must be said methodologically, in the form of general reflection, in order not to be defenceless against the philosophers' philosophy [*um nicht wehrlos zu sein vor der Philosophie der Philosophen*] can be legitimised solely in execution, thus denying the method in turn. A surplus of method, compared with the substance [*Inhalts*] is abstract and false; even Hegel had to put up with the discrepancy between



antipathy to methodology, a methodological residue remains as a consequence of the disjunction which persists between philosophy and its object. This residue is not valid autonomously. It is validated in terms of the horizon of its dissolution. Methodology is therefore reflected on as part of the critical self-reflection of philosophy's limits and their transgression: methodology as critical self-dissolution.

The controversy of metaphilosophy is an historical symptom of the crisis of philosophy's legitimacy. The metaphilosophical question of 'what is philosophy?' emerges with the apprehension of the end of philosophy, and its totalisation within an historical epoch or as a limitation to what it is within the present.<sup>15</sup> For Adorno as well, philosophy becomes a focal point of criticism because it is in crisis, not only in the articulation of its concept, but in terms of its social and historical status, including its own tradition. Adorno considers this crisis to be profound. It is not just a matter of the degree or extent to which philosophy's legitimacy has been questioned, but whether its right to exist has been completely lost. The question of philosophy's legitimacy is therefore to show why and how it has not become completely obsolete. Adorno admitted deep uncertainty over the answer to this question. At the opening of 'Why Still Philosophy?', commenting on the title, he insists that the question is not posed disingenuously as the rhetorical prelude to an assured answer, but because he is

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his Preface to the *Phenomenology* and phenomenology itself. The philosophical ideal would be to obviate accounting for the deed by doing it.'

Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, p.58/Translation p.48.

<sup>15</sup> Habermas has emphasised the extent to which 'metaphilosophy' is a problem of historical crisis: 'Philosophy can no longer refer to the whole of the world, of nature, of history, of society, in the sense of a totalising knowledge. Theoretical surrogates for worldviews have been devalued, not only by the factual advance of empirical science but even more by the reflective consciousness accompanying it. With this consciousness philosophical thought has withdrawn self-critically behind itself; in the question of what it can accomplish with its reflective competence *within the framework* of scientific conventions, it has become metaphilosophy.'

Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action* vol.1, pp.1-2.

‘not at all sure of the answer.’<sup>16</sup> Adorno’s proposed answers are notably presented against the background threat of obsolescence. The ‘Introduction’ to *Negative Dialectics* begins:

‘Philosophy, which once seemed obsolete, lives on because the moment to realise it was missed.’<sup>17</sup> Philosophy is therefore not merely received and recommended as part of the continuum of tradition, academic or otherwise. It becomes a question because its traditional form has become fundamentally problematic. Furthermore, the problematization of its traditional legitimacy does not itself legitimate the attempt to resolve it. Adorno is not a traditionalist in either of these passive or reactive forms. He understands the problem of philosophy in terms of a broad project of enlightenment, which is opposed to the dogmatic tendencies of traditionalism.

Adorno identifies various conditions contributing to philosophy’s crisis.<sup>18</sup>

Fundamentally, two interlinked conditions emerge as decisive: the autonomization of the sciences, through which philosophy loses its legitimacy as a foundational discipline of regional sciences through the progressive specialisation and self-determination of these sciences; and, the ideological function of philosophy, whereby, partly as a consequence of

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<sup>16</sup> Adorno, ‘Why Still Philosophy?’, p.5.

<sup>17</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, p.15/Translation p.3.

<sup>18</sup> In ‘Why Still Philosophy?’ Adorno lists the following conditions of philosophy’s crisis:

‘...[P]hilosophy is no longer applicable to the techniques for mastering one’s life.... [P]hilosophy no longer offers a medium of self-cultivation beyond these techniques, as was the case during the era of Hegel.... Roughly since the death of Kant philosophy has made itself suspect because of its disparity with the positive sciences, especially the natural sciences, and it was the first discipline in public awareness to succumb to the humanistic concept of culture.... [I]n the general tendency towards specialization, philosophy too has established itself as a specialized discipline, one purified of all specific content. In doing so philosophy has denied its own constitutive concept: the intellectual freedom that does not obey the dictates of specialized knowledge. ...[B]y abstaining from all definite content, whether as a formal logic and theory of science or as the legend of Being beyond all beings, philosophy declared its bankruptcy regarding concrete societal goals.’ (pp.5-6)



philosophy's de-legitimation through its disparity from science, it is identified with illusions in the project of political emancipation. This characterization of philosophy's crisis is underpinned by a complex of contributing factors. Principally, the development of secularisation and its nominalist effects, which tends to undermine the validity of philosophy's non-empirical objects; and the progressive specialisation of the division of labour, both between mental and manual labour and within mental labour, which tends to undermine philosophy's traditional scope and convict it of idealism.

Adorno's diagnosis of the conditions of philosophy's crisis is inflected by a critique of science's crisis of legitimacy. This revolves around two main criticisms: the identification of the ideological function of science in its use within various forms of political repression; and, complementarily, the identification of dogmatic tendencies within science's self-understanding and constitution – principally, the presupposition of the effects of specialization and the presupposition of the control of nature as a criterion. The crisis of science throws suspicion on its unity with the project of enlightenment. This is decisive in contributing to the general crisis of the enlightenment as such and transforms the significance of philosophy, particularly in respect of what had previously been a central source of suspicion, its distinction from science. In the light of science's crisis, philosophy offers crucial resources for criticism. However, this does not absolve philosophy from its crisis. Adorno's attempt to legitimate philosophy and develop a resolution of its modern crisis, proposes a recovery of its traditional concept insofar as it provides an antidote to the crisis of the sciences. But this recovery takes place through the critical recognition of philosophy's crisis, including important aspects generated by the development of the sciences. Adorno does not regard the crisis of science to cancel the crisis of traditional philosophy. Both crises are understood in terms of a broader crisis of enlightenment. Adorno's defence of philosophy has its criteria in its commitment to resolving this crisis of enlightenment through the

development of its self-critical renewal. The combination of the crises of philosophy and science generates their mutual suspicion. This demands the development of a discipline capable of recognizing this suspicion and drawing its lessons for the development of the enlightenment. Adorno's contention is that this is provided by the critical recovery of philosophy.

Adorno's resolution of philosophy's contemporary crisis and defence of its legitimacy, proposes a critical recovery of philosophy's traditional self-understanding as a form of freedom from the given, both with respect to theory and praxis. This is presented in direct opposition to modern specialised sciences, insofar as philosophy's claim to freedom or sovereignty is directly contradicted by the presupposition of limits in the regionalisation of the sciences. Thus, Adorno describes philosophy's 'constitutive concept' as 'freedom of spirit, which does not obey the dictates of regional knowledge. [*Freiheit des Geistes, der dem Diktat des Fachwissens nicht pariert.*]'<sup>19</sup> The significance of this definition of philosophy is evident. It provides a strict alternative to the concept of the modern sciences through an appeal to freedom, one of the highest values of the enlightenment, in which the critique of knowledge is combined with the interests of political emancipation. It therefore promises a critique of science that will counter its ideological effects in the name of the enlightenment's self-critical renewal. The critique of philosophy as ideology is therefore reversed and philosophy becomes itself modelled on the critique of ideology.

In order for Adorno to salvage philosophy as a form of freedom, without proposing a simple recovery of philosophy's traditional concept, as if its science-induced crisis should

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<sup>19</sup> The passage from which this claim is made reads as follows: '...in the general tendency towards specialization, philosophy too has established itself as a specialised discipline, one purified of all specific content. In doing so, philosophy has denied its own constitutive concept: freedom of spirit, which does not obey the dictates of regional knowledge.'

Adorno, 'Why Still Philosophy?', p.6.



never have happened, he needs to subject it to a critique that will demonstrate how it can negotiate its modern conditions. This requirement is particularly evident in the attempt to recover philosophy as a form of freedom, insofar as this is traditionally achieved through philosophy's self-understanding as a doctrine of the absolute, a self-understanding that is central to its crisis in the development of the sciences. Adorno's answer to this problem is to defend philosophy's traditional claim to the absolute, insofar as it provides a perspective of critique that would be lost otherwise, but to understand this claim in a negative form, such that it does not present a positive doctrine of the absolute in the manner of traditional metaphysics. This paradoxical-looking task is the ambition of Adorno's critique of philosophy: 'The metacritical [*metakritische*] turn against the *prima philosophia* is at the same time a turn against the finiteness of a philosophy that prates about infinity without respecting it.'<sup>20</sup> Philosophy's legitimacy emerges for Adorno through a negative thinking of the absolute:

After everything, the only responsible philosophy is one that no longer imagines it had the Absolute at its command; indeed philosophy must forbid the thought of it in order not to betray that thought, and at the same time it must not bargain away anything of the emphatic concept of truth. This contradiction is philosophy's element. It defines philosophy as negative.<sup>21</sup>

### **Programme: interpretation**

In his early, programmatic essay 'The Actuality of Philosophy', Adorno introduces the idea of philosophy as a particular form of interpretation, understood as a dialectic of question and answer in which questions are interpreted in order to find their answers. This interpretative

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<sup>20</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, p.25/Translation p.14.

<sup>21</sup> Adorno, 'Why Still Philosophy?', p.7.

concept of philosophy – or ‘philosophic interpretation’ as Adorno terms it at one point – involves a strict delimitation and revaluation of the traditional concept of philosophy, which Adorno characterises according to the fundamental claim ‘that the power of thought is sufficient to grasp the totality of the real.’<sup>22</sup> The collapse of this claim results in the collapse of philosophy’s traditional claim to autonomy and sovereignty, especially in relation to the sciences. The question of what philosophy is after this collapse demands the articulation of its distinction from science without the claim to autonomy or sovereignty. Indeed, it demands the articulation of philosophy’s fundamental entwinement with the sciences. Adorno’s answer is to articulate philosophy’s specificity – and therefore its relation to science – through the distinction of two functions within a unified process of questioning and answering:

Philosophy distinguishes itself from science not by a higher level of generality, as the banal view still today assumes, nor through the abstraction of its categories, nor through the nature of its materials. The central difference lies far more in that the separate sciences accept their findings, at least their final and deepest findings, as indestructible and static, whereas philosophy perceives the first finding which it lights upon as a sign that needs unriddling. Plainly put: the idea of science is research; that of philosophy is interpretation. [*die Idee der Wissenschaft ist Forschung, die der Philosophie Deutung.*]<sup>23</sup>

Philosophy is restricted to the interpretative part of a process of questioning and answering, from which it can no longer claim to stand aloof, either through providing its foundations or

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<sup>22</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, ‘Die Aktualität der Philosophie’ GS. Bd.1 (Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1973), p.325; trans. B.Snow, ‘The Actuality of Philosophy’, *Telos* no.31 (1977), p.120.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. p.334/Translation p.126.



through bringing it to completion.<sup>24</sup> Adorno is effectively articulating the persistence of philosophy's traditional preoccupation with problem-solving – namely, with dialectic – but delimited from its accompanying claims to autonomy or sovereignty. This delimitation is therefore also a transformation. Philosophic interpretation is problem-solving oriented towards truth, but with no guaranteed or pre-established claim to truth.<sup>25</sup> The claim to truth of philosophic interpretation is through its success in dissolving problems. But the answers it enables, the questions it dissolves, are not produced through accessing an essence. Its answers are not the essence or meaning of the questions or problems that generated them. Rather, philosophy reconstructs or reconfigures the elements of a problem or question in such a way that they can be read as a solution or answer. The distinction of this relation of question to answer from the relation of appearance to essence is emphasised by Adorno's insistence that question and answer do not coexist as one behind the other, except momentarily. The answer is a reconstruction of the elements of the question. It is not of an essentially different order. The construction of an answer is consequently the destruction of its question. It is a different organisation of the same elements. This is the source of Adorno's equation of philosophic interpretation with riddle-solving, insofar as the solution of a riddle emerges not simply from

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<sup>24</sup> 'Philosophy will be able to understand the material content and concretion of problems only within the present standing of the individual sciences. It will also not be allowed to raise itself above such sciences by accepting their 'results' as finished and meditating upon them from a safe distance. Rather, philosophic problems will lie always, and in a certain sense irremediably, locked within the most specific questions of the individual sciences.' Ibid. pp.333-4/Translation p.126.

<sup>25</sup> 'Philosophy, persistently and with the claim of truth, must proceed interpretatively without ever possessing a sure key to interpretation; nothing is given to it than the fleeting, disappearing traces within the riddle figures of that which exists and their astonishing entwinings.'

Ibid. p.334/Translation p.126

external knowledge, but through considering its elements in a different way.<sup>26</sup> With this conception of the answering or sublation of questions as reconfigurations or ‘trial combinations’ Adorno receives Benjamin’s conception of the constellatory form of philosophy.<sup>27</sup>

Adorno elaborates the programme of philosophic interpretation as the programme of a historical materialist dialectics. It can be considered an explicit attempt to develop a programme of a Marxist philosophy, or, to put it more circumspectly, a programme of philosophy subsequent to the critique of philosophy introduced by Marx. Adorno makes this claim because of its rejection of an idealist concept of history as a merely intentional object, whether that is due to the reduction of history to its appearance to an observer’s subjectivity, or the apprehension of history as a subject itself, conducting itself through some self-determining course.<sup>28</sup> Adorno identifies this critique of intention or meaning with the critique

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<sup>26</sup> ‘Authentic philosophic interpretation does not meet up with a fixed meaning which already lies behind the question, but lights it up suddenly and momentarily, and consumes it at the same time. Just as riddle solving is constituted in that the singular and dispersed elements of the question are brought into various groupings long enough for them to close together in a figure out of which the solution springs forth, while the question disappears – so philosophy has to bring its elements, which it receives from the sciences, into changing constellations, or, to say it with less astrological and scientifically more current expression, into changing trial combinations, until they fall into a figure which can be read as an answer, while at the same time the question disappears. The task of philosophy is not to search for concealed and manifest intentions of reality, but to interpret unintentional reality, in that, by the power of constructing figures, or images, out of the isolated elements of reality, philosophy sublates [*aufhebt*] questions, the exact articulation of which is the task of science, a task to which philosophy always remains bound, because its power of illumination is not able to catch fire otherwise than on these solid questions.’ Ibid. p.335/Translation p.127.

<sup>27</sup> See section ‘Constellations’, particularly sub-sections ‘*Ideas*’ and ‘*Constellation versus sublation*’ in chapter 4, below.

<sup>28</sup> ‘Interpretation of the unintentional through a juxtaposition of the analytically isolated elements and illumination of the real by the power of such an interpretation is the programme of every authentically materialist knowledge, a programme to which the materialist procedure does all the more justice, the



of symbolisation. This becomes the grammar of a materialist history and the rejection of historicism, whether historicism is understood as the treatment of history as the disintegration of all claims to truth into historical data or the mere stage of the appearance of ideas. Both idealism and historical relativism are therefore considered inverted reflections of each other, with neither establishing a radically historical concept of truth.<sup>29</sup> The second sense in which Adorno identifies interpretation with historical materialist dialectics is in the affinity of its problem solving to praxis. Philosophy is understood to relate to praxis as the reconfiguration of problems leads to the elaboration of solutions. Philosophy demands a new form of praxis whether that is in research or politics and it is indebted to this praxis as its realisation, which brings it to an end, but without which it cannot exist at all.<sup>30</sup>

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more it distances itself from every ‘meaning’ of its objects and the less it relates itself to an implicit, quasi-religious meaning.’ Ibid. p.336/Translation p.127.

<sup>29</sup> ‘...the function which the traditional philosophic inquiry expected from meta-historical, symbolically meaningful ideas is accomplished by inner-historically constituted, non-symbolic ones. With this, however, the relationship between ontology and history would also be differently posited, in principle, without thereby allowing the device of ontologising history as totality in the form of mere ‘historicity’, whereby every specific tension between interpretation and the object would be lost, and merely a masked historicism would remain. Instead of this, according to my conception, history would no longer be the place from which ideas arise, stand out independently and disappear again. On the contrary, the historical images [*geschichtliche Bilder*] would at the same time be themselves ideas, the configuration of which constituted unintentional truth [*intensionslose Wahrheit*], rather than that truth appeared in history as intention.’ Ibid. pp.337-8/Translation pp.128-9.

See chapter 6, below.

<sup>30</sup> ‘The interpretation of given reality and its sublation [*Aufhebung*] are connected to each other, not, of course, in the sense that reality is negated in the concept, but that out of the construction of a configuration of reality the demand for its [reality’s] real change always follows promptly. The transforming [*verändernde*] gesture of the riddle process – not its mere resolution as such – provides the image of resolutions to which materialist praxis alone has access...Only in the annihilation of the question is the authenticity of philosophic interpretation first successfully proven, and the mere thought by itself cannot accomplish this [authenticity]: therefore the annihilation of the question

Without a sufficient claim to totality, philosophy cannot be valued independently, that is, autonomously and sovereignly. The unanswerability of philosophical problems is no guarantee of their value. To suppose this would involve a traditionalism or conservatism in which philosophy is valued purely by virtue of its dislocation with the present. Adorno's concept of interpretation is generated through the question of the *Aktualität* of philosophy, that is, its relevance or topicality to the problems of the present, established through a criterion of 'answerability'. Interpretation therefore involves a critique of the history of philosophy in terms of whether the problems that characterise it are still relevant to the problems of the present, specifically, and rather narrowly considered here, in terms of the problems of the sciences. Although, interpretation is to proceed problem by problem and not with a vague sense of philosophy as a whole, Adorno does extend this question to philosophy as such, insofar as it is defined by the sufficient claim to totality. That is, insofar as, 'the authentic results of the recent history of these problems is the essential unanswerability of the cardinal philosophic questions.'<sup>31</sup> The actuality of philosophy is therefore established in the face of the question of the 'liquidation of philosophy', premised on its claim to totality.<sup>32</sup> Philosophic interpretation therefore becomes a metaphilosophical reflection on the end of philosophy as such. This does not suggest a simple break from traditional philosophy, but a destructive historiography of traditional philosophy in terms of the problems of the present. What becomes apparent therefore is that Adorno's concept of philosophic interpretation

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compels praxis. It is superfluous to separate out explicitly a conception of pragmatism, in which theory and praxis entwine with each other as they do in the dialectic.'

Ibid. pp.338-9/Translation p.129.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. p.331/Translation p.124.

<sup>32</sup> '...the idea of philosophic interpretation does not shrink back from that liquidation of philosophy which to me seems signalled by the collapse of the last philosophic claims to totality.'

Ibid. p.339/Translation (altered) p.129.



involves an anti-traditionalist or modernising interpretation of the tradition of philosophy, in which the quasi-theological and/or idealist claims of traditional philosophy are evaluated in terms of their relevance to a present, understood in essentially secular terms. This reveals a notable consistency between the genesis and structure of interpretation. Interpretation emerges as a consequence of the question of the relevance of philosophy to the present, a relevance which is established as interpretation. It is therefore not an exception to its own rule. In one sense, interpretation can be treated as one philosophical problem among others. In another, the concept of interpretation indicates that Adorno's whole questioning of philosophy is, at root, conceived in terms of a programme of secularised history.<sup>33</sup> The process of question and answer and the question and answer of philosophy itself are both part of an anti-traditionalist historiography.

### *Transformed actuality*

Adorno's concept of philosophic interpretation introduces a programmatic conception of philosophy that can be detected at work throughout his subsequent writings. However, the persistence of this programme is misunderstood if its structure is not understood dynamically. If we compare 'The Actuality of Philosophy' with later programmatic statements, such as the 1962 essay 'Why Still Philosophy?' or the 1966 'Introduction' to *Negative Dialectics*, there are explicit differences which indicate a transformation of his concept of philosophy. However, this transformation does not involve a break with the early programme. Rather, it involves a new diagnosis of the relevance or actuality of philosophy and, correspondingly, a revaluation and reconfiguration of certain key aspects of the model of interpretation.

This transformation is undoubtedly, as Habermas has argued, produced as part of a new diagnosis of the historical present in the light on the Second World War and the

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<sup>33</sup> See in particular section 'Historical metaphysics' in chapter 6, below.

development of Fascism, Stalinism and late capitalism; events which Adorno and Horkheimer interpret as a crisis for the culture of the enlightenment.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, they interpret this crisis and the critical response demanded by it, to generate a new relevance for philosophy. The suspicion that had come to surround philosophy's dislocation from the principal institutions of enlightenment, particularly the positive sciences, is transformed into the interpretation of that dislocation as a critical potential in the predicament of a perverted enlightenment. It involves a new actuality of philosophy, a new question for interpretation: how can the perversion of enlightenment into myth be avoided? This does not involve an uncritical return or renewal of philosophy as a sovereign and autonomous doctrine of truth, independent of the sciences. Consistent with philosophic interpretation, it involves a questioning of the premises of the sciences such that this problem can be resolved. However, philosophy's new relevance emphasises the value of its questioning of science in a way that is absent from 'The Actuality of Philosophy'. Thus, in 'Why Still Philosophy?', the riddle-solving capacity of philosophy becomes identified with philosophy's intellectual freedom, in which the speculative nature of problem solving is identified with the political project of enlightenment.<sup>35</sup> The relevance of philosophy as critique of enlightenment results in a peculiar effect on its relation to praxis. In 'The Actuality of Philosophy' praxis was an effect of the problem-solving motion of philosophy, its ephemeral constitution, through which it is simultaneously realised and brought to an end. However, philosophy's relevance to the critique of the enlightenment is caught or suspended in the failure of philosophy's reconfiguration of the problem to dissolve the question. Philosophy's relation to praxis is

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<sup>34</sup> See chapter 1, particularly '*Dialectic of Enlightenment* as crisis'.

<sup>35</sup> '...in the general tendency towards specialization, philosophy too has established itself as a specialised discipline, one purified of all specific content. In doing so, philosophy has denied its own constitutive concept: freedom of spirit, which does not obey the dictates of regional knowledge.' Adorno, 'Why Still Philosophy?', p.6.



therefore suspended and takes place in a virtual form. Thus, *Negative Dialectics* begins with the claim that philosophy lives on 'because the moment to realise it was missed.'<sup>36</sup> Again, this does not depart from the programme of philosophical interpretation. Rather, it indicates a particular inflection of the actuality of philosophy, its relevance to a political problem whose solution would realise and thereby end philosophy. This explains the transformation of Adorno's diagnosis of the relevance of philosophy with respect to its end. Philosophy's relevance is established quite unproblematically in 'The Actuality of Philosophy', through the distinction of interpretation from the dogmatic retention of traditional problems.

Subsequently, the question of philosophy's end acquires a pathos that is absent there. Thus, 'Why Still Philosophy?' asks if philosophy is still possible at all and *Negative Dialectics* responds that philosophy lives on despite its apparent obsolescence.<sup>37</sup> This is not a change in programme as such. Philosophic interpretation does not produce a secure presence of philosophy. Philosophy has an ephemeral, transitory existence at moments of questioning, that is, at moments of crisis. Thus the issue of the end of philosophy should be understood in terms of whether its questions are still relevant to the present. 'Why still Philosophy?' merely questions this. It is not a melancholic claim on philosophy independently of its value to the predicament of the present. As Adorno notes: 'Because philosophy is good for nothing, it is not yet obsolete: philosophy should not even invoke this point, lest it blindly repeat its wrong: self-justification by self-positing.'<sup>38</sup> Perhaps, the key component of this transformation – the one through which the other effects can most easily be seen to follow – is the revaluation of the question of totality. The concept of philosophic interpretation is premised on the rejection of the capacity of thought to grasp the totality of the real in thought. Adorno does not renege

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<sup>36</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialektik* p.17/Translation p.3.

<sup>37</sup> See Ibid. p.17/Translation p.3; and, Adorno 'Why Still Philosophy?' p.5.

<sup>38</sup> Adorno, 'Why Still Philosophy?', p.15.

on this conviction. However, he develops a dialectic logic in which totality as a negative or critical category is decisive. This is a point of dispute between himself and Benjamin.<sup>39</sup> This negative totality is absent from the programme of philosophic interpretation and as a decisive component of the concept of negative dialectics, can be seen as its transformation. However it is not excluded from it. As a problem of traditional philosophy, the concept of totality can be regarded as re-evaluated in terms of its relevance. In this sense the problem of totality becomes a particular constellation within a programme of interpretation.

### **Obsolescence and need**

The project of the dissolution of philosophy, pursued in terms of the question of its continued actuality or relevance, introduces a form of critique that is programmatic for Adorno's reflection on philosophy. This is elaborated through a consideration of the obsolescence of philosophy in the light of the continuing need for philosophy, a consideration that is not so limited to the conditions imposed by the sciences as is suggested in 'The Actuality of Philosophy'. The essay 'Why Still Philosophy?' announces this consideration of obsolescence in its very title. It considers philosophy as 'a cause deemed obsolete and superfluous by the spirit of the age'<sup>40</sup>, which has therefore become objectively a question that Adorno claims to raise in genuine doubt, 'for the simple reason that I am not at all sure of the answer.'<sup>41</sup> The form of Adorno's response to this question, as in the diagnosis of philosophy's actuality, is not to defend philosophy as serenely indifferent to its modern predicament and thereby secure it as an antiquated form. His insistence is that the legitimation of philosophy must be made in terms of the present, however antagonistically,

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<sup>39</sup> See sub-section '*Ideas*' in chapter 4, below.

<sup>40</sup> Adorno, 'Why Still Philosophy?', *Critical Models*, p.5.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. p.5.



and therefore in recognition, if not in agreement, with the conditions of the present. This permeates the consideration of the question of the need for philosophy. The need for philosophy is what has not been rendered obsolete by the present. This can be recognised in Adorno's confrontation with Marx's rejection of philosophy, as mere interpretation, which is in many ways the crucial condition through which his legitimation of the need for philosophy takes place. Philosophy is not made obsolete by Marx insofar as there remain needs within the present that the Marxist ending of philosophy has not satisfied:

Philosophy, which once seemed obsolete, lives on because the moment to realise it was missed. The summary judgement that it had merely interpreted the world, that resignation in the face of reality had crippled it in itself, becomes a defeatism of reason after the attempt to change the world miscarried.<sup>42</sup>

The need for philosophy is not however simply accepted as some given social fact. It requires interpretation. But this interpretation reveals it to be an essential consideration in the critique of philosophies as social forms, which is central for Adorno's analyses. This is made explicit in his critique of Heidegger, which does not limit itself to the judgement of his texts, but is premised on a critique of what Adorno characterises as 'The Ontological Need', which constitutes the first half of his extensive treatment of Heidegger in *Negative Dialectics*. Adorno judges the truth of Heidegger's philosophy, not just immanently and intra-textually, but in terms of the need which enabled it to have its social resonance and significance: '...[ontology's] effect would be unintelligible if it did not meet an emphatic need, a sign of something missed, a longing that Kant's verdict on a knowledge of the Absolute should not be the end of the matter.'<sup>43</sup> The concept of need hereby enables Adorno to develop a critique of Heidegger in terms of the ideological function of his philosophy and thereby to fulfil a

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<sup>42</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialektik* p.15/ Translation p.3.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. p.69/Translation p.61.

kind of analysis that Marx and Engels had insisted upon against the Hegelians: 'It has not occurred to any of these philosophers to inquire into the connection of German philosophy with German reality, the connection of their criticism with their own material surroundings.'<sup>44</sup> However, the concept of need enables Adorno to avoid the crude implications of Marx's critique of ideology, which tended to consider philosophy as a mere sublimation of the reality underlying it that would evaporate once that reality is adequately described: 'When reality is described, self-sufficient philosophy [*selbständige Philosophie*] loses its medium of existence.'<sup>45</sup> The critique of the need of philosophy that Adorno proposes, seeks to avoid this external or exterior explanation of philosophy as an illusion in terms of the real that underlies it, by considering the desire that a philosophy responds to as a socially substantive consideration. The ideology of a philosophy is therefore examined in terms of what generates it, as well as what it obscures or misrepresents. Examining the structure of need that permeates a philosophy also enables a greater sensitivity to the immanent critique of the philosophy's text, which Adorno does not wish to explain purely externally, as the Marxian critique of ideology indicates, insofar as it leaves it untouched and unbothered in its own self-understanding. Diagnosing the phantasmatically infused need that makes a philosophy resonate socially and gives it a social life, mediates the dislocation of philosophy and social fact, and enables the critique of ideology to be pursued right into the immanence of a philosophical text. Adorno does not thereby treat the need for a philosophy as a fact that is indisputable as such. It is subject to criticism and, in the case of the need for ontology, it was considered 'The Wrong Need' by Adorno.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology* (Lawrence and Wishart, London, Moscow, 1976), p.30. See section 'Ideology-critique' in chapter 6, below.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid p.37.

<sup>46</sup> 'Delusion is boundless in the field in which the official cultural canon deposits its assets, in the supposedly sublime field of philosophy. Its most urgent need today appears to be the need for



Adorno's ideology-critique of the need for philosophy is not only indebted to Marx, but also, and more directly even, to Kant. The critique of metaphysics that Kant introduces in *Critique of Reason* poses two key questions: 'How is metaphysics, as science, possible?' and 'How is metaphysics, as a natural disposition, possible?' This latter question concerns therefore the 'need' that appears to motivate humans inevitably towards metaphysics.<sup>47</sup> This question is central to Kant's transcendental dialectic, which examines this metaphysical need in terms of the inevitability of the illusions it generates and the legitimate employment this need and its illusions should have within a critical philosophy; since 'here we have to do with a *natural* and inevitable *illusion*...' <sup>48</sup> Kant answers this question through establishing the regulative, as opposed to constitutive, employment of this illusion, thereby developing a dialectical logic. Kant's critique of metaphysics is inflected by Marx's critique of ideology, extending and criticising the inevitability of metaphysical illusion, its 'naturalness', through an examination of its social constitution. This Kantian-Marxism is discernable in Adorno's

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something solid. This need inspires the new ontologies; it is what they adjust to. Its right lies in the will of people to be safe from being buried by the historical dynamics they feel helpless against. The immovable is to conserve the old and condemned. The more hopeless this longing, blocked by the extant forms of society, the more irresistible the trend of desperate self-preservation to a philosophy that is to be both in one: desperate and self-preserving. The invariant frames are made in the image of an omnipresent terror, of the dizziness that overcomes a society threatened by total destruction. If the threat vanished, its positive reversal – itself nothing but its abstract negation – would probably vanish with it.' Adorno, *Negative Dialektik* p.100/Translation p.93.

<sup>47</sup> 'For human reason, without being moved merely by the idle desire for extent and variety of knowledge, proceeds impetuously, driven on by an inward need, to questions such as cannot be answered by any empirical employment of reason, or by principles thence derived. Thus in all men, as soon as their reason has become ripe for speculation, there has always existed and will always continue to exist some kind of metaphysics.' Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (Philipp Reclam, Stuttgart, 1966); trans. N.K.Smith, *Critique of Pure Reason* (Macmillan Press, London, 1929), p.B21.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. p.A298/B354.

common characterisation of ideology as ‘socially necessary illusion’.<sup>49</sup> While Adorno departs from the transhistorical inevitability of illusion claimed by Kant, its social diagnosis does not dissolve it as mere illusion. This is enforced by Adorno’s consideration of the emancipatory desires that infuse social illusions or ideologies, and that furthermore, infuse the needs that permeate a philosophy. The illusory quality of need becomes fundamental to a philosophy that expresses a critique of the status quo, and which therefore cannot ground its claims simply in what exists in the present. This valuation of the emancipatory logic of dialectics in terms of a form of metaphysical need, informs the pathos of his historical reformulation of Kant’s questions: ‘In place of the Kantian epistemological question of how is metaphysics possible, steps the historical-philosophical question of whether metaphysical experience is at all still possible.’<sup>50</sup> Adorno’s historicisation of the need for metaphysics leads to the consideration of its withering. The pathos of this historicisation is generated by the extent to which the enlightenment’s secularisation of metaphysics has led to a new form of ideology; an ideology that nothing beyond or outside the status quo can be hoped for; a reversion of enlightenment into myth. In the light of this new ideology, the old fear of ideology – the fear that it was not real – is thrown into a new light. It reveals an emancipatory dimension and the possibility of a renewal of enlightenment, its critical self-reflection. Adorno’s meditations on metaphysics insist that transcendence is essential to the recognition of finitude and leads to the project of a historical materialism whose rejection of theology

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<sup>49</sup> ‘...der gesellschaftlich notwendige Schein...’ Theodor W. Adorno, ‘Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft’ (1967) GS Bd.10.1 (Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt an Main, 1977), p.26. Translated by S. Weber and S. Weber as ‘Cultural Criticism and Society’ in *Prisms* (MIT Press, Cambridge Ma., 1984), p.26.

<sup>50</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialektik* pp.364-5/ Translation (altered), p.372. This differentiates Adorno from the strictly immanent development of Marxism introduced by Althusser’s Spinozism. See Louis Althusser, ‘Elements of Self-Criticism’ in *Essays in Self-Criticism* trans. G. Lock (New Left Books, London, 1976), pp.105-50.



draws back from the straightforward insistence on immanence: 'The question whether metaphysics is still possible at all must reflect the negation of the finite which the finite requires. Its enigma [*Rätselbild*] animates the word "intelligible".<sup>51</sup> This finite sense of transcendence is deemed crucial to historical materialism as an emancipatory project, insofar as it maintains a sense of the future as a disruption of the present. Adorno discerns in Kant's dialectic of illusion, the critical self-reflection of an emancipatory need for a different future to that projected by the present; not merely the regulative limitation of these needs and their reduction to ideals, but the historical experience of a future that is not present: 'Metaphysical speculation unites with speculation in the philosophy of history; for the chance of the right consciousness even of those last things it will trust nothing but a future without life's miseries.'<sup>52</sup>

Philosophy for Adorno is a form of thinking that is self-consciously infused with unsatisfied needs, with the desire for emancipation; a conviction he shared with Marcuse and Horkheimer.<sup>53</sup> It is not merely need or merely the dissolution of need, but its critical self-reflection. Drawing a parallel to Hegel's thesis of the end of art, Adorno poses the question of the persistence of philosophy beyond its projected end in terms of a persistence of the need for it.<sup>54</sup> Philosophy becomes a 'consciousness of needs'; that is, a form of criticism dedicated

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<sup>51</sup> *ibid.* p.385/Translation p.392.

<sup>52</sup> *ibid.* p.390/p.398.

<sup>53</sup> See Herbert Marcuse, 'Philosophy and Critical Theory', trans. J.J.Schapiro, *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory* (Free Association Books, London, 1988) pp.134-58; and Max Horkheimer, 'Traditional and Critical Theory', trans. M.J.O'Connell, *Critical Theory: Selected Essays* (Continuum, New York, 1995), pp.188-243.

<sup>54</sup> 'Hegel who was aware of the transience of art and prophesied its end, had made its progress dependent upon the 'consciousness of needs'. But what is right for art is just as right for philosophy, whose truth content converges with that of art, by virtue of the technical procedures of art diverging from those of philosophy.' Adorno, 'Why Still Philosophy?', p.14.

to responding to what is unsatisfied or unfulfilled within the present. Adorno's continuation of philosophy in the light of Marx's attempt to overcome or realise it, is therefore a response to the needs that are left unsatisfied by the failure of that realisation:

The undiminished persistence of suffering, fear, and menace necessitates that the thought that cannot be realised should not be discarded. After having missed its opportunity, philosophy must come to know, without any mitigation, why the world – which could be paradise here and now – can become hell itself tomorrow. Such a knowledge would indeed truly be philosophy. It would be anachronistic to abolish it for the sake of a praxis that at this historical moment would inevitably eternalise precisely the present state of the world, the very critique of which is the concern of philosophy.<sup>55</sup>

What should be recognised in Adorno's characterisation of the need of philosophy, or philosophy as a consciousness of needs, is not just that it is inextricably fused with needs or desires, but that these needs are directly related to the historical question of obsolescence; that the need of philosophy is inflected directly with the obsolescence of philosophy. What

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It has been pointed out that Adorno's interpretation of Hegel refers in fact to an editorial error in Hegel's text. (See the editorial comments in footnote 22 to Adorno's text, *ibid.* p.319.) However, Hegel also introduces the concept of the 'need for philosophy' in a distinct but directly relevant manner in his early essay on 'The Difference Between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy', where it is identified as the basic antagonism that spurs a philosophy into existence; which infuses it as its fundamental presupposition; a given that permeates it: 'If we look more closely at the particular form worn by a philosophy we see that it arises, on the one hand, from the living originality of the spirit whose work and spontaneity have re-established and shaped the harmony that has been rent; and on the other hand, from the particular form of the dichotomy from which the system emerges. Dichotomy is the source of *the need of philosophy*; and as the culture of the era, it is the unfree and given aspect of the whole configuration.' G.W.F.Hegel, 'The Difference Between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy', p.262.

<sup>55</sup> Adorno, 'Why Still Philosophy?', p.14.



emerges as the need for philosophy is not simply what is untouched or unaffected by what renders it obsolete, such as the emergence of the positive sciences. The need for philosophy is not merely a rump or leftover that persists. In that sense, philosophy would never have been, legitimately, rendered obsolete. What is at stake, rather, is a need that only emerges through philosophy's obsolescence; a need that is generated as a result of the obsolescence of philosophy. The need for philosophy is not a matter of simply pointing out what remains living in it, or recalling what should be revived from what has died in it: it is a matter of the possibilities or potential that is released by philosophy through being rendered obsolete.

Philosophy is transformed by the experience of its obsolescence, by the destructive effects of anti-philosophy. The problem of philosophy in Adorno is fundamentally influenced by the conception of emancipatory historiography and, indeed, emancipatory historical experience, developed by Benjamin; initially, in terms of his analysis of the historical emergence of truth through history as a process of decay, and subsequently, in terms of an emancipatory historical consciousness, associated with Surrealism.<sup>56</sup> Adorno's defence of philosophy in the light of Marx's rejection of it, does not attempt to simply hang on to what Marx did not reject. It identifies the need of philosophy as emerging through the transformation of

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<sup>56</sup> Benjamin indicates the 'revolutionary nihilism' at stake in the interpretation of the obsolete or outmoded in his essay on Surrealism: '[Breton] was the first to perceive the revolutionary energies that appear in the 'outmoded'...the objects that have begun to be extinct... The relation of these things to revolution – no one can have a more exact concept of it than these authors [i.e. the Surrealists]. No one before these visionaries and augurs perceived how destitution – not only social but architectonic, the poverty of interiors, enslaved and enslaving objects – can be suddenly transformed into revolutionary nihilism... They bring the immense forces of 'atmosphere' concealed in these things to the point of explosion... The trick by which this world of things is mastered – it is more proper to speak of a trick than a method – consists in the substitution of a political for a historical view of the past.'

Walter Benjamin, 'Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia', trans. E. Jephcott, *One Way Street: And Other Writings* (Verso, London, 1979) pp.229-30.

philosophy as a consequence of Marx's critique.<sup>57</sup> What is at stake in the need for philosophy, therefore, is not just a pre-established need, persisting from the past to the present; but a desire, generated in and through the present and projected onto something apparently anachronistic, namely philosophy. As something from the past which has been or is in the process of being rendered obsolete by the present, philosophy becomes a repository for the frustrated desires of the present and hopes for the future. Philosophy's obsolescence disengages it from its functional entwinement in the status quo and releases its potential for a critique of the present and an alternative future. This potentiality is infused not simply by what philosophy was, but by the needs or desires that it becomes a refuge for, in solidarity against the processes which outmode it; desires which transform what it was, in terms of what is needed for a critique of the present and an alternative future.

This transformative legitimation of philosophy – made explicit through the consideration of the continuing function of philosophy in the face of its apparent functionlessness within the present – is elaborated most clearly perhaps by Horkheimer, in his essay on the 'Social Function of Philosophy'.<sup>58</sup> Horkheimer argues, against the apparent indication of the essay's title, that the absence of a social function of philosophy is precisely what establishes its significance and therefore its 'function'. Its functionlessness gives it a critical perspective on the functionalised totality that society has increasingly become. Adorno assumes this conception of philosophy's critical functionlessness, which, combined

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<sup>57</sup> The need for philosophy does not therefore mean simply the recovery of idealism, as Adorno makes clear: 'Praxis whose purpose is to produce a rational and politically mature humanity, remains under the spell of disaster unless it has a theory that can think the totality in its untruth. It goes without saying that this theory should not be a warmed-over idealism but rather must incorporate societal and political reality and its dynamic.' Adorno, 'Why Still Philosophy', p.14.

<sup>58</sup> Max Horkheimer, 'The Social Function of Philosophy', *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, pp.253-72.



with the dissolution of philosophy's self-sufficiency or autonomy, generates the task of philosophy within the present:

Only a thinking that has no mental sanctuary, no illusion of an inner realm, and that acknowledges its lack of function and power can perhaps catch a glimpse of an order of the possible and the nonexistent, where human beings and things each would be in their rightful place.<sup>59</sup>

The identification of philosophy's functionlessness draws an analogy to the functionlessness that characterises autonomous art. However, whereas Adorno considered the critical value of art's functionlessness to lie in its autonomy – its self-sufficient refusal of socially pre-established functions – the critique that philosophy's functionlessness enables is a result of its dissolution of its self-sufficiency, in which pre-established functions are refused through its openness, rather than, as in art, through its closedness. Art and philosophy therefore generate two, complementary images of freedom.

The question of the obsolescence and need of philosophy directly informs the dispute over Critical Theory that has emerged in the light of Habermas's critique of the Frankfurt School and, in particular, Adorno. Habermas's critique of Adorno's philosophy is explicitly directed at its obsolescence, its entrapment in an outmoded paradigm of the philosophy of consciousness. Furthermore, Habermas's contribution to Critical Theory evidently proposes itself, at least initially, as an attempt to respond to the need for a greater mediation with practice, that Adorno had failed to satisfy.<sup>60</sup> But the attempt to respond to this emancipatory need is increasingly subordinated or re-orientated to the normative grounding of emancipatory claims, in the development of Habermas's position. Adorno's failure becomes

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<sup>59</sup> Adorno, 'Why Still Philosophy?', p.15.

<sup>60</sup> See in particular Jürgen Habermas, *Theory and Praxis* (1971) trans. J. Viertel (Polity Press, Cambridge, 1988).

a failure to normatively ground emancipatory claims. This turn to a normative critique, employed regulatively, in the light of an ideal of reconciliation – the ‘ideal communicative community’ – effectively withdraws from Critical Theory as an emancipatory critique, committed, not to grounding its claims within the present or ideally, but in a different future.<sup>61</sup> This development of Habermas’s work has revived the need for an emancipatory critical theory, a need which looks back to the supposed obsolescence of Adorno with this in mind. My contention is that this need finds a response in that which had appeared most obsolete in Adorno’s concerns: the concept of philosophy. Adorno’s philosophy survives its obsolescence because it presents the attempt to develop an emancipatory critique of the social totality in a form that has dissolved in Habermas’s development of Critical Theory. Far from a block to the emancipatory project of Critical Theory, the concept of philosophy turns out to be crucial to it. This need infuses the question of philosophy in Adorno and the attempt to draw it out of obscurity.

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<sup>61</sup> See chapter 1, above.



## Chapter 3

### Division of labour

The attempt to defend philosophy as 'freedom of spirit, which does not obey the dictates of regional knowledge'<sup>1</sup>, without restoring its traditional form as a sovereign doctrine of the absolute, generates a paradox for philosophy, in which its concept and its employment appear to be subjected to an impossible and therefore fatal predicament. If philosophy is not to restore itself as a totalization of regional knowledges, as Adorno insists, it must deal with the question of its limitation and specificity. Furthermore, if it is not to secure its specificity in the form of a discipline that grounds regional knowledges – that is, as a first philosophy of whatever type – as Adorno also insists, how can philosophy's specificity avoid becoming a specialism that participates within the dictates of regionalized knowledge, and therefore fulfil its idea as free from these dictates? Philosophy, according to Adorno's insistence, is thrown into the paradox of being simultaneously an anti-specialism and a specialism. Adorno is not blind to this paradox. It is identified explicitly in his lectures on *Philosophische Terminologie*, where it is presented as a central theme of the definition of philosophy: 'philosophy is itself a paradoxical form; simultaneously a specialism and no specialism...'<sup>2</sup> In a homologous formulation he refers to, 'The double character of philosophy as specialism and non-specialism...'<sup>3</sup> However, these characterizations do not describe a fatal constitution according to Adorno. They are rather antinomic or contradictory conditions, the negotiation of which constitutes philosophy as a task; a task that renders philosophy necessarily

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<sup>1</sup> Adorno, 'Why Still Philosophy?', p.6.

<sup>2</sup> '...die Philosophie selber ein paradoxes Gebilde ist; gleichzeitig ist sie ein Fach und kein Fach...', Adorno, *Philosophische Terminologie*, vol.1, p.9.

<sup>3</sup> 'Der Doppelsein der Philosophie als Fach und als Nicht-Fach...', *ibid.* p.44.

dialectical. The paradox of a non-specialist specialism is therefore not the statement of an impossible problem, but turns out to be the riddle-like articulation of a solution in terms of a problem. It therefore corresponds to the form of solutions generated by philosophical interpretation as outlined in 'Actuality of Philosophy': it is like the solution to a riddle revealed in the riddle itself.<sup>4</sup>

Adorno understands philosophy's entwinement in the process of specialization according to its subjection to the general process of division of labour, involving both the division of manual from intellectual labour as well as divisions within intellectual labour. Furthermore, he understands this process to be part of the development of secularisation and its attendant tendency towards nominalism; both central processes of enlightenment. Adorno's critique of this process of enlightenment does not propose a simple reversal or

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<sup>4</sup> See chapter 2, 'Programme: Interpretation' above. This characterization of philosophy's form has recently been reiterated as the most productive contemporary role of philosophy today by Peter Osborne:

There has been an increasing disjunction, since the death of Hegel, between the theoretical self-limitation of philosophy as a professional activity and the broader cultural functions of self-knowledge and the provision of coherence in the totality of experience (including, necessarily, expectations about the future) through which the classical vocation of philosophy as a mode of life (indeed, allegedly the highest mode, the philosophical life) has been carried forward, transformed, into the modern world. This disjunction is expressed in two radically different notions of philosophical universality: one, *disciplinary* and merely logical or methodological in form; the other, *anti-disciplinary*, substantive, historical, and inherently speculative. However, paradoxically, for all its prospective *inter-disciplinarity*, this latter, *anti-disciplinary*, speculative form of universality cannot but appear alongside the preconstituted disciplines – including the narrow variant of philosophy itself – as an *anti-disciplinary specialism*, excessive in relation to each and every disciplinary field, yet without a determinate field of its own. This paradoxical, primarily critical role – analogous to the place of aesthetic judgement within Kant's system – remains, I shall suggest, the most productive role for philosophy today.



suspension of the division of labour. It is not merely disparaged as an obstacle to the development of freedom, but as a crucial dimension of the development of enlightenment.<sup>5</sup> Philosophy's antipathy to specialisation is not proposed as a rejection of specialisation as such, or as a critique from an autonomous standpoint. It is rather entwined in it as a critique of its deleterious effects. Philosophy's disengagement from the division of labour is therefore the critical self-reflection of the division of labour, in the name of that which should motivate this division, that is, enlightenment or freedom. It is therefore conceived consistently with the programme of enlightenment's self-critical renewal proposed in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Adorno's criticism of division of labour, like his criticism of administration, is often misrecognised as nostalgic reaction rather than enlightenment's critical self-reflection. But as he occasionally made clear, 'A rational and genuinely free society could do without administration as little as it could do without the division of labour itself.'<sup>6</sup>

Adorno's critique of specialization is directed at what he diagnoses as its principal effects: the splitting of spirit into specialized disciplines instituted with a claim to objectivity, and the institution of non-specialized disciplines, or non-disciplines, which, in opposition, are reduced to non-objective or subjective claims. Specialized disciplines are, for Adorno, paradigmatically modern, quasi-autonomous, sciences and his concept and critique of science

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<sup>5</sup> Adorno, 'Society', trans. F. Jameson, in *Critical Theory and Society: A Reader* eds. S.E. Bonner and D.M. Kellner (Routledge, London, New York, 1989) p.273.

<sup>6</sup> '...unlike those who administer it, philosophy is concerned with thought, insofar as this does not succumb to the prevailing division of labour or allow it to dictate its tasks. The status quo compels men not merely by physical force and material interests but also through its overpowering suggestion. Philosophy is not synthesis; and it is not the fundamental or master science. It is the attempt to resist this suggestion, the determination to hang on to intellectual and real freedom. The division of labour, as it has developed under domination, is by no means overlooked in the process. Philosophy sees in it only the lie that there is no escaping it....Philosophy believes that the division of labour exists to serve mankind, and that progress leads to freedom. This is why it is so apt to come into conflict with both of them.' *Dialectic of Enlightenment* pp.243-4.

is concerned fundamentally with processes of specialization, primarily with the limitations they need to presuppose in order to achieve certainty and rigor over their particular object of analysis and research. This concerns both the dogmatic legitimation of the conditions presupposed in the emergence of sciences and, complementarily, the dogmatic legitimation of its delimited knowledge as the only, or highest, claim to truth. These blind spots are generated by the necessary withdrawal from a consideration of the totality of relations in which a science's claims are instituted, as a consequence of its attempt to achieve expertise in a particular area. Philosophy is for Adorno characterized essentially by this concern for totality or the absolute. This distinguishes it fundamentally from specialized disciplines. Adorno does not, however, attempt to secure philosophy as an autonomous doctrine of the absolute in the form of traditional metaphysics. Indeed, his critique of metaphysics is directed at the extent to which this traditional form is itself derived from the model of science, specifically, mathematics.

Philosophy's antipathy to specialization generates its sympathy or affinity for non-specialised activities in which the claim to totality is still present. However, this sympathy is inflected simultaneously by philosophy's antipathy towards the generalized or abstract form of non-specialized activities, not least in their fearful or indifferent opposition to the sciences. Philosophy's affinity with a non-specialist apprehension of totality cannot therefore appropriate this abstract form without betraying its claim to truth, which remains decisive for Adorno; not least if it is to provide a genuine critique of science. At one point Adorno cites 'common language use' [*allgemeinen Sprachgebrauch*]<sup>7</sup> as the principle non-specialized form through which philosophy generates itself, referring to Socrates' critique of the opinions of everyday discourse as exemplary of philosophy's attempt to distinguish itself. Journalism or the press is diagnosed as a form in which a taste for the spectacular parodies philosophy's

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<sup>7</sup> Adorno, *Philosophische Terminologie* vol.1, p.48.



non-specialised concerns.<sup>8</sup> This critique results in philosophy generating a specialism of its own and thereby developing its paradoxical practice. Philosophy's antipathy to non-specialism's fallacies – its generalisation, subjectivism, as well as its dogmatism – leads it to a critique of non-specialism in which it develops a precision and rigor in its use of language that effectively specializes it and renders philosophy a discipline that produces and reproduces this precision as a specialism of its own. Ironically, philosophy generates itself as a specialised discourse out of the immanent critique of its dependency on non-specialised discourse. This specialization of philosophy, emerging from its critical inflection of non-specialism, is complemented by its inflection of specialized disciplines, which informs its critique of non-specialism, relying upon knowledge developed in specialized disciplines.

Philosophy therefore emerges through the critical mediation of specialized and non-specialized discourses in its commitment to truth. This mediation dissolves the strict antagonism of philosophy to the development of specialization insofar as Adorno maintains its significance for the development of enlightenment. Philosophy's critique of the process of specialization is characterized as a concern for what is threatened by that process. This does not reduce philosophy to the fearful preservation of what has yet to be destroyed by that process. Philosophy constitutes itself through seeking the objects and processes that reveal what has been lost or forgotten through specialization.<sup>9</sup> It is not therefore a refuge against specialization. It is the immanent critique of what specialization represses.

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<sup>8</sup> 'Unlike the press, [philosophy] does not attach greater weight to mass slaughter than to the murder of a few mental defectives. It does not pay more attention to the intrigues of a statesman flirting with Fascism than to a lynching spree of modest proportions. For philosophy, the frenzied publicity of the film industry rates no higher than an intimate funeral announcement. Philosophy has little taste for sheer size. Therefore it is simultaneously alien and sympathetic to the status quo. Its voice belongs to the object, though without its will. It is the voice of contradiction, which would otherwise not be heard but triumph mutely.' Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* p.244.

<sup>9</sup> Adorno, *Philosophische Terminologie* vol.1, pp.47-8.

Philosophy's constitution as a task in which its paradoxical relation to specialisation is negotiated, already distinguishes it from the typical effects of specialization. The fact that philosophy's anti-specialism leads it to want to be a non-specialism, while this is constantly thwarted, defines philosophy as a form of searching or desire; not simply in the weak sense of a prelude to satisfaction, achievement or realisation, but in the emphatic form of constitutive anticipation or lack. This determines philosophy's relation to its objects and distinguishes them from the customary specialization of knowledge according to proper objects of investigation and research. It is misleading to describe philosophy as possessing objects that determine what it is. Philosophy's objects are objects of desire; objects which it cannot have or possess, but which are constituted through the desire for them. Philosophy constitutes itself through these objects of desire. Adorno identifies this structure of desire to be fundamental to philosophy's classical elaboration of love in Plato's *Symposium*. This lives on in the negative form of philosophy.<sup>10</sup> Dialectics must be negative if it is to be properly philosophical.

Adorno's critique of Hegel's 'positive dialectics', is confirmed by Hegel's declared departure from the classical concept of philosophy, as a love of knowing, in favour of an actual knowing:

The true shape in which truth exists can only be the scientific system of such truth. To help bring philosophy closer to the form of Science, to the goal where it can lay aside the title 'love of knowing' and be *actual* knowing – that is what I have set myself to do.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> As Adorno remarks, referring to the relentlessness of philosophizing: 'With the word relentlessness [*Unerbittlichkeit*] I touch on an aspect that for me is the form of love in philosophy, as it is perhaps today thinkable, as its only possible appearance, namely as the form of negativity.' *Philosophische Terminologie* vol.1, p.200.

<sup>11</sup> G.W.F.Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V.Miller (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1977), p.3.



### Non-philosophy/anti-philosophy

Adorno's determination of the concept of philosophy is established not only through its antipathy to specialism and non-specialism, but through its differentiation from various other practices or realms of practice that delimit it. This delimitation is established dialectically, through the determinate negation of these non-philosophical practices. This is not the consequence of a transhistorical requirement of determination, but because of the historical emergence of a crisis of philosophy's legitimacy and the need to critically delimit it in order to secure its legitimacy within the present. The emergence of this effort of legitimation generates a critique of philosophy as such; a discourse of metaphilosophy, in which philosophy becomes the object of critical reflection. Some sense of metaphilosophical discourse can be identified at the inception of Western philosophy, as a necessary dimension of its self-conscious denomination and distinction from other practices.<sup>12</sup> However, the modern crisis of philosophy's legitimacy that emerged between the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, can be differentiated by a qualitatively distinct recognition of the growing authority of non-philosophical practices, particularly with the independent development of the natural sciences. Kant's *The Conflict of the Faculties* can be read as a

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<sup>12</sup> Wilhelm Dilthey identifies the emergence of philosophy with the self-conscious dissolution of its unity with religion and art:

The profoundly significant union of religion, art, and philosophy, in which the orientals lived, broke up with the Greeks into the three separate forms of creative mental activity. Their bright, self-confident spirit freed philosophy from the constraint of the religious attitude and from the visionary symbolism of philosophical and religious poems. Their power of plastic perception worked toward the separate development of these kinds of mental creation. Thus philosophy, its concept, and the expression *philosophia* arose in Greece together.

Wilhelm Dilthey, *The Essence of Philosophy* (1907, 1910), trans., S.A.Emery and W.T.Emery (AMS Press, 1954, 1969), p.8.

document of this metaphilosophical discourse on non-philosophy, adjudicating between legitimate and illegitimate conflicts over philosophy's authority.<sup>13</sup> However, Adorno's determination of philosophy is elaborated subsequent to the intensification of the questioning of philosophy's legitimacy to the point of generic negation: the question of the end or destruction of philosophy, announced canonically by Marx. After this critique, metaphilosophy is no longer simply the question of an equitable division of labour between philosophy and non-philosophy, in which philosophy's place is implicitly secured. A new discourse of anti-philosophy now inflects metaphilosophical reflection. The conflicts which Kant acknowledges between philosophy and other faculties concern the extent of philosophy's sovereignty, not its right to exist. Implicitly they may anticipate this crisis, but explicitly they do not raise this question. Adorno's critique of philosophy is defined by the recognition of the growing cultural authority of anti-philosophy; by the extent to which philosophy is 'deemed obsolete and superfluous by the spirit of the age.'<sup>14</sup> With Adorno, metaphilosophical reflection is extended to the radical limit of the negation of philosophy as such. This is not simply reflection on the end of philosophy, its death, and the beginning of its retrospective historicisation or memorialisation. It is the intensification of philosophy's critical self-reflection. Anti-philosophy is recognized as the dialectical negation required of philosophy's critical self-reflection; the instigation and central task of metaphilosophy. It is this recognition of anti-philosophy that gives Adorno's critique of philosophy its modernity and reveals its significance for a present in which this discourse of anti-philosophy has come into its own in all but name.

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<sup>13</sup> Immanuel Kant, *The Conflict of the Faculties* trans. M.J.Gregor (University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, London, 1979).

<sup>14</sup> Adorno, 'Why Still Philosophy?', p.5.



The emergence of anti-philosophy qualitatively transforms the problem of philosophy's legitimation. Philosophy is confronted with a newly generic objection which invokes a newly generic response. Ironically, anti-philosophy effectively radicalises the stakes of philosophy's defence, expanding and transforming its self-conception. This can be seen in the critique of philosophy's debt to other practices, such as the sciences, now identified not only as non-philosophy, but as a challenge to philosophy. Anti-philosophy's critique of philosophy's tacit dependence on certain non-philosophical disciplines invokes a defence of philosophy that is radically independent of them and founded on a different principle. Or, conversely, it demands that philosophy be identified as just one science among others, with no extraordinary status. Heidegger's renewal of fundamental ontology and Logical Positivism's delimitation of philosophy as a special science, can be recognized as alternative responses to anti-philosophy. Adorno's response is not to confront anti-philosophy directly with the appropriation of its reverse image of philosophy or to acquiesce to it. Rather, it internalises the critique of philosophy into its own medium. Philosophy is transformed by anti-philosophy into its self-criticism: 'Having broken its pledge to be as one with reality or at the point of realization, philosophy is obliged ruthlessly to criticise itself.'<sup>15</sup> This renders philosophy negative. But this self-criticism does not result in a narcissistically narrowed concern. In Adorno, anti-philosophy generates a radically expansive and open-ended concept of philosophizing, through the negation of its traditional, self-sufficient form.<sup>16</sup> The negative apprehension of the absolute thereby enables a renewal of speculative critique.

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<sup>15</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p.3.

<sup>16</sup> See section 'World-Concept of Philosophizing' below.

## Not science

Adorno's criticism of the cultural authority of science has tended to be received as a crude, neo-Romantic denegation of science in favour of philosophy. As we have seen, this view has been sponsored by Habermas as the cause for the crisis of Adorno's development of critical theory after the Second World War.<sup>17</sup> However, the reduction of Adorno's critique of science to its rejection as instrumental, in favour of philosophy, is misleading. Undoubtedly, Adorno's elaboration of the relation of philosophy to science is obscure, beyond his denunciation of it as instrumental. However, its reconstruction reveals a far less denigrated concept of science than he is often accused of holding and certainly does not propose, as Habermas asserts, a displacement of science as such. As Adorno declares in <sup>the</sup> Preface of *Negative Dialectics*: 'Stringently to transcend the official separation of pure philosophy and the substantive or formally scientific realm was one of his [i.e. the author's/Adorno's]

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<sup>17</sup> See section 'Re-philosophization' in chapter 1, above. Habermas refers to Helmut Dubiel's research as evidence of the, "re-philosophising" of the whole theoretical orientation of the Institute in its emigration to the United States':

Finally, in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* all specialized scientific work is identified with its technical application to production or to society and discredited as 'positivistic', 'instrumental' and the like. In opposition to the 'instrumentalist' spirit of the age, which finds its exemplary palpable expression in the specialized sciences, philosophy is supposed to become encysted as a mental preserve for a shattered intellectual culture. The actual research practice of the Institute is symptomatic of the relation between philosophy and specialized science. It is true that further empirical work was done in the wide ranging studies on Fascism and in the "Studies in Prejudice"; but the empirical work of Adorno, for example, stands alongside his temporally parallel philosophical reflections in a bewildering absence of any mediation between the two.

*Theory of Communicative Action*, vol.1, fn70, pp.454-5.

The obscurity that Dubiel refers to here is itself identified by Habermas as another consequence of Critical Theory's 're-philosophization'; partly as the result of an anti-positivist objection to affirming contents that might substantiate it and partly due to the anti-idealist objection to developing a systematic concept of it. This diagnosis is a failure to appreciate the concept of philosophy at stake.



determining motives.’<sup>18</sup> Nor does it propose a radical re-grounding of science, which Habermas at one point discerns as Adorno’s secret wish, along with the other members of early Critical Theory, particularly Marcuse.<sup>19</sup> This is the source of Habermas’s association of Adorno with Heidegger. However, Adorno’s critique of science is distinct from the proposal of a primordial thinking through which science could be radically renewed, which Heidegger pursues in his early project of a fundamental ontology in *Being and Time*, and, subsequently, in the task of thinking the possibility of such an ontology. In his late essay, ‘The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking’, Heidegger identifies philosophy directly with metaphysics.<sup>20</sup> The sciences are not considered a challenge to philosophy, but rather the working out or elaboration of the ontological field of possibilities that is opened up by philosophy. This elaboration is a dissolution of philosophy in the sense that it realises philosophy and thereby brings it to an end.<sup>21</sup> The task of thinking at the end of philosophy involves revealing the conditions of possibility presupposed in philosophy’s opening up of

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<sup>18</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p.xx.

<sup>19</sup> ‘In several passages Marcuse is tempted to pursue this idea of a New Science in connection with the promise, familiar in Jewish and Protestant mysticism, of the “resurrection of fallen nature”. This theme, well-known for having penetrated into Schelling’s (and Bader’s) philosophy via Swabian Pietism, returns in Marx’s *Paris Manuscripts*, today constitutes the central thought of Bloch’s philosophy, and, in reflected form, also directs the more secret hopes of Walter Benjamin, Max Horkheimer, and Theodor W. Adorno.’ Jürgen Habermas, ‘Technology and Science as “Ideology”’ (1968) in *Towards a Rational Society: Student Protest, Science and Politics* trans. J.J.Shapiro (Polity Press, Cambridge, 1987) pp.85-6.

<sup>20</sup> Heidegger begins the first section of this essay, ‘Philosophy is metaphysics.’ See Martin Heidegger, ‘The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking’ (1966) trans. D.F.Krell, *Basic Writings* (Routledge, London, 1993), p.432.

<sup>21</sup> ‘The development of the sciences is at the same time their separation from philosophy and the establishment of their independence. This process belongs to the completion of philosophy. Its development is in full swing today in all regions of being. This development looks like the mere dissolution of philosophy, yet in truth is precisely its completion.’ Ibid.p.433.

this field of sciences, which is obscured by the dissolution of philosophy.<sup>22</sup> Adorno's concept of philosophy's speculative critique has much in common with Heidegger's conception of the task of thinking, particularly insofar as it is differentiated from philosophy or metaphysics as the ontological grounding of the sciences. However, for Adorno, this takes place through a process of critical self-reflection of the sciences that is concretely entwined with their conditions. It does not aspire to a primordial experience of their ground that would be free from this entwinement.

Adorno distinguishes philosophy from science emphatically, but not exclusively. They are understood as two dimensions of a total process to which both are indebted and which neither is able to present independently of each other. Their distinction is established according to a dialectical differentiation of speculation and science, derived principally from Kant and Hegel, with philosophy corresponding to speculative critique and science to complete, systematic conceptual determination of what is. This is elaborated with the further distinction of philosophy and science from art, through the broadly Kantian model of fulfilled experience as requiring concepts and intuitions. Science and art are understood, respectively, as the sedimented social realms of the conceptual and intuitive dimensions of experience. Philosophy is a third practice, neither science nor art, which criticises science and art in relation to the totality which they constitute in combination. Philosophy is therefore delimited by its function as a critique of the relation of science and art, or concept and intuition. This differentiation of philosophy, science and art is required by Adorno's rejection of philosophy as capable of actualising complete experience; that is, of grasping the absolute sufficiently. Philosophy is needed as a consequence of the inability of science or art to grasp the absolute,

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<sup>22</sup> 'We must think *alētheia*, unconcealment, as the clearing that first grants Being and thinking and their presencing to and for each other... *Alētheia* is named at the beginning of philosophy, but afterward it is not explicitly thought as such by philosophy.' Ibid. pp.445-6.



either individually or together.<sup>23</sup> Philosophy therefore acquires its specificity as both the symptom and the critique of the reduction of totality to one or other of its aspects.

Philosophy's inability to present fulfilled experience is due to its essentially conceptual medium, which renders its autonomous claims to totality idealistic as a result of its inability to fully subsume intuitions. According to Adorno's division, its conceptual medium associates philosophy closer to science than to art. But, philosophy is distinguished from science insofar as its relation to concepts is constituted by the preoccupation with what they do not subsume, with the non-conceptual. The apparently paradoxical task of experiencing the non-conceptual through concepts is philosophy for Adorno. Philosophical experience of concepts is characterised by the semblance character of conceptual determination; the illusoriness of their claim to complete determination. This thinking beyond concepts is philosophy's essentially speculative quality. The significance of art, as a practice constituted by a preoccupation with semblance or illusion, is due to Adorno's identification of the speculative quality of philosophical experience with <sup>the</sup> experience of semblance in art. This infuses the significance of art and aesthetics for Adorno's concept of philosophy. This is manifested in philosophy's language, its linguistic formation of concepts, which

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<sup>23</sup> 'The separation of science and scholarship from art is irreversible....With the objectification of the world in the course of progressive demythologisation, art and science have separated. A consciousness for which intuition and concept, image and sign would be one and the same – if such a consciousness ever existed – cannot be magically restored, and its restitution would constitute a regression to chaos. Such a consciousness is conceivable only as the completion of the process of mediation, as utopia, conceived by the idealist philosophers since Kant under the name of *intellektuelle Anschauung*, something that broke down whenever actual knowledge appealed to it.' Adorno, 'The Essay as Form', p.6.

approximates art in its preoccupation with the non-conceptual expression of its presentational form.<sup>24</sup>

Adorno justifies the distinction of philosophy and science in terms of the project of enlightenment. It attempts to counter the decline of the enlightenment that results from the uncritical assumption of the legitimacy of the sciences as the medium of freedom. Adorno's argument, developed principally in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, is that the sciences have become part of a new dissolution of the project of a freely self-determining humanity and that thereby they have become part of a new ideology in the project of enlightenment. The identification of philosophy and science furthers this uncritical legitimation, both by dissolving philosophy as a higher value to that of science and, more crucially for Adorno, destroying the critical perspective enabled by philosophy's difference from science. The unity of philosophy and science, which once presented the essence of enlightenment, becomes an obstacle to enlightenment. Their distinction in the name of the critique of science becomes, for Adorno, the renewal of the project of enlightenment, its critical self-reflection.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> '[Philosophy's] integral, nonconceptually mimetic moment of expression is objectified only by presentation in language. The freedom of philosophy is nothing but the capacity to lend a voice to its unfreedom. If more is claimed for the expressive moment it will degenerate into a *Weltanschauung*, where the expressive moment and the duty of presentation are given up, philosophy comes to resemble science.' *Negative Dialectics*, p.18.

<sup>25</sup> Adorno outlines this reversal in the task of enlightenment as follows:

The integration of philosophy and science, already inscribed *in nuce* in the earliest documents of Western metaphysics, strove to protect thought from dogmatic tutelage, which thought resembles by its autocratic nature and which is the negation of all freedom. But freedom was the goal of the postulate of the direct 'involvement' of vital, active mind in all acts of cognition, the indefeasible norm of self-evidence ever since Spinoza. It was, in the realm of mere logic, the anticipatory image of an actual state in which human beings would finally be free, rid of every kind of blind authority. This has reversed itself. The invocation of science, of its ground rules, of the exclusive validity of the methods that science has now completely become, now constitutes a surveillance authority punishing free, uncoddled, undisciplined



The critical relation of philosophy and science is, for Adorno, already implicit in the contradiction induced by the attempt to form philosophy as a science, according to which, philosophy seeks to distinguish itself from the sciences, while simultaneously taking science as its model. Adorno rejects this traditional conception of metaphysics as a science, which remains true of Kant and Hegel. Moreover, he rejects it as the precursor of the dissolution of metaphysics altogether in the name of science.<sup>26</sup> Kant and Logical Positivism are continuous in this sense for Adorno. The distinction of philosophy from science is an attempt to recover an older, pre-modern sense of philosophy's autonomy from science, but which is only revealed by the modern crisis of philosophy and which is situated in terms of the modern demand to enable science's critical self-reflection; and not as the renewal of philosophy's sovereignty or autonomy. Threatened by its identity with science, philosophy renews itself as a direct consequence of this crisis, through the assumption of the critique of science as one of its central tasks. Philosophy lives on through realizing the critical potential freed through its obsolescence as science. Philosophy is therefore legitimated through its distinction from science, not only as a distinction from non-philosophy, but, from the explicit anti-philosophy of Logical Positivism's critique of metaphysics.<sup>27</sup> Adorno's legitimation of philosophy takes

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thought and tolerating nothing of the mental activity other than what has been methodologically sanctioned. Science, the medium of autonomy, has degenerated into an instrument of heteronomy.

Adorno, 'Why Still Philosophy?', p.12.

<sup>26</sup> 'The transformation of philosophy into science, even into the first science which would ground the individual sciences, or the highest science, the queen of the sciences... is not fortunate maturation in which thought divests itself of its childish rudiments and subjective wishes and projections. Rather, it undermines the concept of philosophy itself.'

Adorno, *Against Epistemology*, pp.41-2.

<sup>27</sup> 'Unless the idealistically acquired concept of dialectics harbours experiences contrary to the Hegelian emphasis, experiences independent of the idealistic machinery, philosophy must inevitably

place in explicit recognition of this discourse of anti-philosophy; through the negation of philosophy's extreme negation.

Philosophy's differentiation from science in terms of their relation to conceptualisation is elaborated in terms of the division of labour. Adorno tends to understand the individual sciences as the generic result of specialization. This traverses the distinction of human and natural sciences, which Adorno rejects as a fundamental principle for the concept of science. Furthermore, the division of labour elaborates the crisis that the sciences' emergence generates for philosophy: the development of their specialization, both from each other and from any all-encompassing or meta-scientific discipline. It therefore describes the de-legitimation of philosophy's traditional claim to totality, in terms of the socially sedimented de-legitimation of philosophy as the practice capable of mediating completely the modern specialization of society. However, this is not simply fatalistic social description. Adorno identifies the division of labour and the specialization of the sciences as a fundamental achievement of enlightenment, consistent with its nominalist tendency towards secularization, and not as a process of decline to be arrested or reversed. This generates an apparently paradoxical problem for the legitimation of philosophy. The sciences' specialization has generated philosophy's crisis, but its legitimation must not obliterate this specialization. The crisis for philosophy's modern legitimacy – the questioning of whether philosophy has become an obsolete intellectual discipline subsequent to the self-assurance of the sciences – cannot therefore be achieved through a recovery of a pre- or post-modern dissolution of the divisions between the sciences or between science and philosophy, without undermining enlightenment. This problem differs fundamentally to Heidegger's problem of the task of thinking, which, in attempting to reveal the forgotten philosophy that has

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do without substantive insight, confine itself to the methodology of science, call that philosophy, and virtually cross itself out.' Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, pp.7-8.



dissolved into the specialisation of the sciences, seeks their fundamental ground and unity. It therefore proposes a radical destruction of specialisation, consistent with a philosophy of first principles. For Adorno, the problem is in a sense less radical and more concretely embedded in the ongoing task of modern enlightenment, and acknowledges a more intractable complexity in the field of the different sciences. Adorno's critique of the presupposition of the domination of nature within science and the inculcation of instrumental rationality, emerges as the result of such a critique of science. Adorno does not propose to obliterate the very possibility of individual sciences and somehow replace them with philosophy, as has been suggested by Habermas. Philosophy's distinction from science as speculative critique does not seek to obliterate the scientific division of labour as essentially heteronymous, but to bring its heteronymous effects to critical reflection, a task that cannot be achieved by it as an individual science.<sup>28</sup> Adorno was not therefore against the division of labour as such, nor did he think that philosophy should avoid it.<sup>29</sup> The crisis it generates for philosophy becomes central to its critical task.

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<sup>28</sup> 'When thought shuts itself off from the division of labour, it falls behind the development of forces and behaves "archaically". If as a science, however, it integrates itself into the sciences, then it renounces its proper impulse at the very point where it most needs it. It remains reified, a mere imitation modelled on societal categories and ultimately relations of production.... Science reifies whenever it defines coagulated spiritual labour, knowledge unconscious of its societal mediations, as straightforward knowledge.' Adorno, *Against Epistemology*, p.43.

<sup>29</sup> 'I am not ignoring the necessity of philosophy's becoming autonomous vis-à-vis the individual scientific and scholarly disciplines. Without that separation the natural sciences at least could hardly have experienced such rapid development. Perhaps even philosophy itself was not able to attain its profound insights until, like Hegel, it had voluntarily or involuntarily taken its leave from the activities of the individual disciplines. It is futile to hope for a magical reunification of what has been separated....' Adorno, 'Philosophy and Teachers', *Critical Models*, pp.22-3.

## Not art

Philosophy is distinguished from art, according to Adorno, insofar as philosophy deals properly with concepts, whereas art deals with intuition, or, as he more commonly terms it, expression and mimesis. This differentiation describes simultaneously their affinity.

Philosophy, as that which attempts to conceptualise the non-conceptual, the intuitive, requires mediation with art. Philosophy needs art as that expressive moment which is desired but unachievable solely through concepts.<sup>30</sup> Conversely, art needs philosophy as that conceptual moment which is desired but unachievable solely through intuitions:

One could perhaps say this epigrammatically: In art the truth or the objective or the absolute becomes wholly expression, whereas conversely in philosophy expression becomes, at least in its tendency, truth.<sup>31</sup>

Philosophy's mediation with art must simultaneously be mediated with science, as the realm of concepts, which disciplines the formation of philosophy's conceptualization and prevents them degenerating into the subjective bias threatened by exaggerating their intuitive

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<sup>30</sup> 'It can be said that philosophy, and theoretical thought as a whole, suffers from an idealist prejudice insofar as it disposes solely over concepts; only through them does it treat what they are concerned with, which it itself never has. Its labour of Sisyphus is that it must reflect the untruth and guilt that it takes on itself, thereby correcting it when possible. It cannot paste its ontic substratum into the text; by speaking of it, philosophy already makes it into what it wants to free itself from.' Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p.258.

<sup>31</sup> Adorno, *Philosophische Terminologie*, vol.1, pp.87-8.



moment.<sup>32</sup> Philosophy therefore has the character of, 'a third or other, apprehended against science and against art.'<sup>33</sup>

Adorno's critique of philosophy's distinction from art is elaborated through a critique of autonomy, to which both philosophy and art are subject, particularly insofar as the issue of their autonomy reveals a deep entwinement of philosophy and art. The crisis of philosophy's autonomy – the inherent idealism of the self-sufficient system – is therefore recognized by Adorno as entwined in a crisis of the autonomy of art. Adorno's critique of autonomy reconceives of the affinity of philosophy and art developed in German Idealism and announced explicitly in Schelling's identification of art as the organon of philosophy, where art becomes the model for philosophy's autonomy.<sup>34</sup> Adorno's recognition of this dual crisis is especially noteworthy in the light of his preoccupation with the defence of art's autonomy. This defence must, however, be understood in relation to his critique of philosophy's autonomy. The apparent irony that Adorno's defence of art's autonomy contrasts so markedly with his rejection of philosophy's autonomy, reveals on further reflection a more complex self-consciousness of their entwinement. Indeed, at key points Adorno makes clear that just

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<sup>32</sup> J.M.Bernstein has identified Adorno's parallel between art and philosophy and intuition and concept: 'Art and philosophy stand to one another as intuition to concept, particular to universal.' *The Fate of Art: Aesthetic Alienation from Kant to Derrida and Adorno*, (Polity Press, Cambridge, 1992), p.244. However, he does not identify the further dimension of science within this relation, no doubt because of its obscurity within *Aesthetic Theory*.

<sup>33</sup> '...Dritte oder Andere gegenüber der Wissenschaft und gegenüber der Kunst fasst.' *Philosophische Terminologie* vol.1, p.88.

<sup>34</sup> 'The work of art merely reflects to me what is otherwise not reflected by anything, namely that absolutely identical which has already divided itself even in the self. Hence, that which the philosopher allows to be divided even in the primary act of consciousness, and which would otherwise be inaccessible to any intuition, comes, through the miracle of art, to be radiated back from the products thereof.' F.W.J.Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism* (1800) trans. P.Heath (University Press of Virginia, Charlottesville, 1978), p.230.

as the development of the autonomy of systematic philosophy emerges through analogy to the autonomous artwork, so the crisis of philosophy's autonomy reveals an analogous crisis for the autonomy of art.<sup>35</sup>

The establishment of art's autonomy through its limitation to non-conceptuality secures its legitimacy in the face of conceptualisation, but limits its claim to truth. This emerges in the crisis of art's semblance character and its legitimacy as an illusion rather than a mere thing. Art's response to this crisis is a critical self-reflection, which leads to a self-destructive tendency – a tendency towards anti-art or, what Adorno terms, 'de-artisting' [*Entkunstung*] – in which art attempts to critically redeem its illusoriness. This takes place, on the one hand, through an increasingly radical mediation with its non-illusoriness or sheer literalness; with the extent to which it is just an empirical object. On the other hand, in order to remain art, this mediation must not dissolve its illusoriness altogether.<sup>36</sup> This leads to a radicalised process of autonomous self-insistence, through which art tries simultaneously to avoid being merely the illusion of something else, while preventing this degenerating into the complete dissolution of its illusoriness: 'The mimesis of artworks is their resemblance to

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<sup>35</sup> 'With good reason, idealism historically – in Schelling – derived its own concept of truth from art. The closed yet internally dynamic totality of idealist systems was read out of artworks. However because philosophy bears upon open reality and in its works is not autarchically organised to the same degree as are artworks, the cloaked aesthetic ideal of systems necessarily shattered. These systems are paid back in their own coin with the ignominious praise that they are philosophical artworks. The manifest untruth of idealism, however, has retrospectively compromised artworks. That in spite of their autarchy and by means of it they seek their other, what is external to their spell, drives the artwork beyond the identity with itself by which it is fundamentally determined. The disruption of its autonomy was not a fateful decline. Rather, it became art's obligation in the aftermath of the verdict over that in which philosophy was all too much like art.' Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* p.130.

<sup>36</sup> 'If the question as to the future of art were not fruitless and suspiciously technocratic, it would come down to whether art can outlive semblance.' Ibid. pp.101-2.



themselves.<sup>37</sup> This generates the other aspect of art's crisis: its understanding or its capacity to communicate, since its self-insistence leads it to risk an incommunicability and general difficulty, in which it risks not being understood at all, or not communicating anything at all. This makes it more vulnerable to communication through externally imposed conceptualisation and its crude subjection to philosophy, or indeed, science. Simultaneously, its internally developed self-reflection makes it increasingly approximate conceptual self-articulation.<sup>38</sup> This crisis can be seen, perhaps most dramatically, in Conceptual Art, where there is often a convergence between the self-conceptualising artwork and conceptualisation as an artwork itself. The problem of art-criticism for Adorno is to communicate art without reducing it to concepts; to unfold its internally self-reflective form in order to communicate its peculiar incommunicability; that is, to communicate the muteness that is art's speech.

This crisis of art's autonomy is mirrored by philosophy, but in relation to philosophy's limitation to concepts. In fact, this is the other side of art's crisis. Philosophy's attempt to overcome its limitation to concepts generates its own self-destructive desire to become more like art, to approximate an aesthetic dimension through which it can overcome the inherent abstractness of its form.<sup>39</sup> Philosophy must incorporate a mimetic quality in its

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid. p.104.

<sup>38</sup> '...the progressive self-unfolding truth of the artwork is none other than the truth of the philosophical concept.' *Aesthetic Theory*, p.130.

<sup>39</sup> J.M.Bernstein has pointed to Adorno's prototypical recognition of the convergence of art and modernist philosophy:

Over the past two decades, art's liquidation has led its critical moment to pass to philosophies, theories, that are themselves self-consciously modernist in their outlook and procedures. Philosophical *writing* has become the attempt to produce texts that are to be *judged* the way works [of art] were judged: purposeful histories without external ends (Foucault), interventions in the texts of the tradition that withdraw their referentiality in a gesture that reveals their difference from themselves (Derrida), or fragmentary writing (Adorno). Philosophy has come to disavow its conceptuality through a self-surmounting in the direction

language. However, this can only be critical. Philosophy cannot become art itself without abandoning its critical self-reflection of conceptualisation; the task through which it criticises science. Adorno does not therefore present a collapse of philosophy into art. Far from it:

A philosophy that tried to imitate art, that would turn itself into a work of art, would be expunging itself...Common to art and philosophy is not the form, not the forming process, but a mode of conduct that forbids pseudomorphosis. Both keep faith with their own substance through their opposites: art by making itself resistant to its meanings; philosophy, by refusing to clutch at any immediate thing.<sup>40</sup>

Philosophy is strictly distinguished from art, albeit through its dialectical negation. Just as art's legitimation requires its mediation by anti-art, of which philosophy is an aspect; so the legitimation of philosophy requires its mediation by anti-philosophy, of which art is a part.

The affinity of philosophy and art is also significantly inflected by the critique of the division of labour. The autonomous artwork presents philosophy with a monadic insistence, that generates, albeit negatively, a relation to the social totality that traverses the institutional divisions of specialized knowledges. Indeed, the self-critical constitution of art – its mediation of a dimension of anti-art – renders the constitution of art history inherently problematic if it is only based on what has historically been rendered art. Art needs philosophy, not just in order to mediate its peculiarly mute language, but, relatedly, to render

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of particularity.... Adorno's second reflection explains why these philosophical programmes have come to matter in the way they do, why their particularization appears as somehow necessary and true despite the fact of their leaving truth behind. Philosophy has both autonomously and parasitically been caught up in the logic of modernism.

*The Fate of Art*, p.264. However, this diagnosis must be understood in terms of Adorno's emphatic rejection of 'philosophical artworks'.

<sup>40</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p.15.



its negative constitution within the social totality, a task which is inherently problematised by the intellectual division of labour:

Aesthetics presents philosophy with the bill for the fact that the academic system degraded it to being a mere specialization. It demands of philosophy precisely what philosophy has neglected to do: that it extract phenomena from their existence and bring them to self-reflection; this would be the reflection of what is petrified in the sciences, not a specialized science located beyond them.<sup>41</sup>

Art is therefore implicitly a criticism of philosophy, a criticism of its failure to try to understand art in terms of academic specialization. As such, art presents a critical self-reflection of philosophy. But through its relation to art, philosophy achieves a medium through which it can overcome its specialization. Adorno continues further on: 'Every artwork, if it is to be fully experienced, requires thought and therefore stands in need of philosophy, which is nothing but the thought that refuses all restrictions.'<sup>42</sup> Art therefore provides philosophy with an object through which it can be critically redeemed from its disintegration by the division of labour, as a speculative critique of totality.

### **Not *Weltanschauung***

Philosophy is not *Weltanschauung* according to Adorno. *Weltanschauung* stands, besides science and art, as a crucial negative determination of philosophy. In fact, the conflation of philosophy and *Weltanschauung* is, for Adorno, the collapse of the tension between science and art in the determination of philosophy. As the aspect of 'intuition' or '*Anschauung*'

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<sup>41</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p.262. Adorno hereby revives a feature of Kant's aesthetics as its is developed in the *Critique of Judgement*: namely, that it presents a critique, essential to the examination of reason, but which is not the prelude to a science or metaphysics, and therefore with a particular object domain, but the critique of the conditions of possibility of such domains.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. p.262.

implies, the conflation of philosophy and *Weltanschauung* is understood by Adorno as a consequence of the over-identification of philosophy with art or the intuitive dimension of conceptual thought. *Weltanschauung* is the conceptual product of this conflation with art.<sup>43</sup> As an intuitive form, freed from the conceptual disciplining of the sciences, Adorno identifies *Weltanschauung* with a subjectivism which attempts to think the absolute on a subjective basis, abandoning an emphatic claim to truth to this end: 'The sphere of *Weltanschauung* is, in other words, opinion raised into system....'<sup>44</sup> As a consequence, Adorno identifies 'Weltanschaulich thinking' with the assumption or generation of 'standpoints'; that is, with more or less strategically constituted perspectives which do not institute themselves with an emphatic claim to truth. For Adorno, philosophy is distinguished as the immanent critique of standpoints and the attempt to move beyond them.

*Weltanschauung* remains however a crucial determination of philosophy for Adorno, because it expresses needs which are crucial to philosophy, needs that philosophy must interpret and respond to. It therefore becomes, like science, a key determination in the

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<sup>43</sup> 'Between the scientific moment and the mimetic or experiential moment a tension holds sway. Philosophy becomes untrue precisely at the moment in which it loses this tension and becomes defined after the one or after the other so-called principle, fastening itself there. With that I have already delimited philosophy from what appears to me to be very dubious in it, from the misunderstanding of philosophy as *Weltanschauung*. If philosophy isolates itself, without experiencing that friction with science, simply keeping with this moment of expression, the rest is falsified usually just by itself from the beginning, namely, it is reified; then it degenerates into the opposite. Philosophy is just as opposed to *Weltanschauung* as to reified thought.'

Adorno, *Philosophische Terminologie*, vol.1, pp.91-2.

<sup>44</sup> 'I call *Weltanschauung* representations of the essence and connection of things, the world, humans, which measure themselves by the subjective need for unity, for explanation, finally for answers, and which for the sake of this satisfaction of subjective cognitive needs abandons the claim to objective truth at the outset. The sphere of *Weltanschauung* is, in other words, opinion raised into system, and it is a common characteristic for *Weltanschaulich* thinking that it tends to speak of a *Weltanschauung* as "my *Weltanschauung*". Ibid. p.118.



specification of philosophy and properly philosophical problems. Principally, it expresses a need to make sense of the totality that is constitutively unsatisfied by specialised disciplines.<sup>45</sup> This resonates with philosophy's own task of providing a critique of the intellectual division of labour. This task is, however, not achieved by the subjectivism of *Weltanschauungen*, according to Adorno. The critique of the division of labour must involve a critical self-reflection of its limitations, mediated by the need for these divisions, rather than their mere suspension, which is liable to be a naïve and merely compensatory objection. The naïve subjectivism of *Weltanschauungen* is nonetheless significant for philosophy, according to Adorno, insofar as it expresses a need for commitment; commitment to a view or project constituted at the level of totality.<sup>46</sup> Philosophy is for Adorno fundamentally a critical reflection on truth and consequentially antipathetic to the concept of commitment, except perhaps in the sense of a commitment to truth.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Qualifying his distinction of philosophy and *Weltanschauung* Adorno comments: 'You must therefore not forget that the determination of *Weltanschauung* I have given you at the start, first of all actually describes a philosophical need. If an uneducated person approaches philosophy, someone who does not have the relation to philosophy that one possesses to some information or to some reified knowledge, but a living relation, he does that with just that need for sense, with that need for totality, with all that which finds expression in *Weltanschauungen*.' Ibid. p.122.

<sup>46</sup> 'If I practice critique against the concept of *Weltanschauung* I must also equally say, as I have done with the critique of scientific elements of philosophy, that you must also retain something of *Weltanschauung*. Finally the retained is just that which is most smiled at in those obsolete *Weltanschauungen*, namely, the Elan of subjects to attempt something without allowing it to be prescribed. Just this Elan, just this aspect of do-it-yourself, is what today in the administrated world, under the predominance of relations under which we all think, has the light appearance of naivety. In short, *Weltanschauung* has today the form which one in general describes with the concept of commitment [*Bindung*]. So-called commitments are what have replaced *Weltanschauung*.' Ibid. p.125.

<sup>47</sup> 'Commitment is a theme of philosophy, but it is not a postulate of philosophy. The only legitimate commitment which philosophy can countenance would be to truth and the development of this commitment in the commitment to truth constitutes the whole content of philosophy. If one wanted to

Philosophy is therefore constituted in opposition to *Weltanschauung* as well as science insofar as both present the collapse of philosophy. Philosophy constitutes itself, as it were, between them. This triangular determination is not just Adorno's determination of philosophy, but the determination of philosophy's problems. It is notable that, with great regularity and consistency, Adorno presents philosophical problems in terms of a dispute between a science and a *Weltanschauung*. The specific task of philosophy is to interpret a problem that is either obscured by this opposition, or oscillates between *Weltanschauung* and science without finding resolution. Thus, for example, the first model of *Negative Dialectics* characterises the problem of freedom as something that suffers from the oscillation between a science, criminal jurisprudence, that is incapable of responding to the scope and complexity involved in the concept of freedom, and a *Weltanschauung*, which attempts to compensate for this incapacity, but through a purely subjective account of irrational desires. Philosophy has the task of mediating this opposition, in an attempt to salvage what remains of value in the idea of freedom from the obsolescence it faces as a result of this opposition.<sup>48</sup>

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make from that a commitment it would still be questionable, as Nietzsche has revealed in his reflection on the concept of truth, even in this concept itself, this apparently most autonomous of all concepts, something of the shadows of the old heteronomy lives on, which thought should release itself from.' Ibid. p.130.

<sup>48</sup> 'But because an individual science – the prime example is criminal jurisprudence – cannot cope with the question of freedom and must reveal its own incompetence, it seeks help from the very philosophy whose bad, abstract antithesis to scientism will not let it render that help. Where science finds problems insoluble and looks to philosophy for a decision, philosophy extends no more than the solace of a *Weltanschauung*. It is from this, then, that the scientists take their bearings – according to taste and, one must fear, according to the structure of their own psychological drives. The relation to the complex of freedom and determinism is laid into the hands of an arbitrary irrationality that wavers between dogmatic generalities and inconclusive, more or less empirical single determinations. In the end, one's position regarding that complex comes to depend upon his political creed, or upon the power he happens to recognise at the moment. Reflections on freedom and determinism sound archaic, as though dating from the early times of the revolutionary bourgeoisie. But that freedom



Adorno's constitution of philosophy through the dual opposition to science and *Weltanschauung* can be recognised as an alternative to a similar constitution of philosophy by Husserl. In a seminal statement of the philosophical character of phenomenology, 'Philosophy as a Rigorous Science', Husserl presents philosophy in distinction from science, at least insofar as it is conceived naturalistically, on the one hand, and, on the other, in distinction <sup>from</sup> *Weltanschauung*, understood as historicism.<sup>49</sup> Of course, as the essay title indicates, the distinction of phenomenology from scientific naturalism is in order to institute phenomenology as a more radical, more rigorous science than naturalism. It therefore displays the classic syndrome Adorno diagnoses of philosophy establishing its specificity from science through modelling itself on science, and, as in the case of Husserl instituting itself as a supreme science. This triangular determination of philosophy is also present in an early characterisation of fundamental ontology by Heidegger. In his early lectures, *Towards the Definition of Philosophy*, Heidegger establishes philosophy, as fundamental ontology, in opposition to the alternative choices of the sciences or *Weltanschauung*.<sup>50</sup> As fundamental ontology, philosophy is not a science, insofar as it establishes the fundamental ground of what the sciences are, thereby providing a unification of the values of the sciences without resorting to the subjectivism of *Weltanschauung*. Fundamental ontology is thereby constituted as 'primordial science', corresponding once again to Adorno's diagnosis of the distinction of philosophy from science through modelling it on science. Like Husserl and Heidegger, Adorno seeks to evade the division of science and *Weltanschauung* through a

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grows obsolete without having been realized – this is not a fatality to be accepted; it is a fatality which resistance must clarify.' *Negative Dialectics*, p.215.

<sup>49</sup> Edmund Husserl, 'Philosophy as a Rigorous Science', trans. Q.Lauer *Husserl: Shorter Works*, McCormick and Elliston eds. (University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), pp.166-97.

<sup>50</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Towards the Definition of Philosophy* (1919) trans. Ted Sadler (Athlone Press, London, New Jersey, 2000).

more emphatic claim to truth. But unlike both of them this does not involve a deeper grounding of the sciences. It is emphatically against the renewal of *prima philosophia*.

### Not praxis

Praxis is another key negative determination of Adorno's delimitation of philosophy and one which inflects its relation to science and *Weltanschauung* as well as art. The relation of philosophy to praxis is understood by Adorno primarily in terms of the division of intellectual and manual labour, according to which, following Marx, philosophy – and indeed theory as a whole – is considered an alienated or abstract form of labour.<sup>51</sup> As alienated labour philosophy remains a form of praxis. Furthermore, this alienation effects the character of manual labour. Insofar as manual labour is itself a consequence of the dissolution of the unity of theory and praxis, the plea to dissolve theory into praxis must avoid conceiving praxis as manual labour. This would reduce the genuine reconciliation of praxis with the alienated suppression of one side of its dichotomy. This is effectively Adorno's critique of Marxist inspired calls for the obliteration of philosophy into praxis. Its consequence is a 'pseudo-praxis'; that is, a prematurely foreclosed dissolution of the praxis of theory. Adorno's response to accusations that he had resigned in the face of the demand for praxis, was therefore to claim, that they were in fact the ones calling for resignation; the resignation of the praxis of theory, of philosophy.<sup>52</sup> In many respects, Adorno retained a sense of the

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<sup>51</sup> 'Whoever does not want to romanticize the Middle Ages must trace the divergence between theory and praxis back to its oldest division between physical and intellectual labour, probably as far back as prehistoric obscurity. Praxis arose from labour. It attained its concept when labour no longer wanted to merely reproduce life directly but to produce its conditions: and this clashed with the already existing conditions.' Adorno, 'Marginalia on Theory and Praxis', *Critical Models*, p.262.

<sup>52</sup> See Adorno's essay 'Resignation' in *Critical Models*, pp.289-94. For perhaps the exemplary critique of Adorno by the student Left see Hans-Jürgen Krah, 'The Political Contradictions of



specifically revolutionary practical dimension of philosophy, which had been articulated perhaps most elegantly by Korsch.<sup>53</sup> Against this foreclosure, Adorno attempts to establish philosophy's self-consciousness of its alienated form in order to bring this alienation to critical self-reflection, rather than to repress or further this alienation through collapsing philosophy's theoretical form. Adorno argues that in order that praxis can be sustained as an image of reconciliation, philosophy needs to be recognised, not just as a suppression of manual labour, but as the attempt to present that image of a unified praxis through the medium of an alienated form. Autonomous philosophy, in its separateness from manual labour, therefore presents an image or illusion of what a reconciled praxis would be. Adorno therefore recognises the deep ambivalence of Marx's critique of idealism; that its practical dissolution of idealism is ironically consistent with the idealistic unification of theoretical and practical reason presented in Fichte.

Besides philosophy, Adorno identifies art as also providing an image or illusion of a reconciled praxis.<sup>54</sup> Freed from instrumentally imposed ends, the purposelessness of the autonomous artwork presents a form of material praxis that would be free, were it not for its

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Adorno's *Critical Theory*' (1969) trans. P. Murray and R. Heydebrand, *Telos* no.21, (1974?), pp.164-7. See Adorno's essay 'Resignation' in *Critical Models*, pp.289-94.

<sup>53</sup> '...[T]he dialectical materialism of Marx and Engels is by its very nature a philosophy through and through, as formulated in the eleventh thesis on Feuerbach and in other published and unpublished writings of the period. It is a revolutionary philosophy whose task is to participate in the revolutionary struggles waged in all spheres of society against the whole existing order, by fighting in one specific area – philosophy. Eventually, it aims at the concrete abolition of philosophy as part of the abolition of the bourgeois social reality as a whole, of which it is an ideal component. In Marx's words: "Philosophy cannot be abolished without being realised."'

Karl Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy* (1922) trans. F. Halliday (New Left Books, London, 1970).

<sup>54</sup> 'Praxis was the reaction to depravation; this still disfigures praxis even when it wants to do away with deprivation. To this extent art is the critique of praxis as unfreedom; this is where its truth begins.' Adorno, 'Marginalia on Theory and Praxis', *Critical Models*, p.262.

constitutively alienated form as something autonomous, that is, as something disengaged from society. In its attention to this dimension of art, philosophy's interpretation of art engages directly in the forging of a realization of praxis; not despite, but because it is disengaged from the instrumental demands of political demands.

Adorno's defence of philosophy in the face of the appeal for its dissolution into, what is effectively, manual labour, therefore reveals once again the sense in which philosophy is legitimated not through the demarcation of non-philosophy, but through its confrontation with a discourse of anti-philosophy. This is a discourse that is not merely rejected, but which is recognised by Adorno as an ongoing task of philosophy. If the realization of praxis is to realise its political ambitions, rather than simply insist on an alienated form of labour (i.e. manual labour), it needs a form of thinking the totality of social relations in terms of its transformation: the central task of philosophy as the critical self-reflection of the absolute, that is, as negative dialectics.<sup>55</sup>

### **World-concept of philosophy**

Adorno appeals to Kant's 'world-concept of philosophy' as a model for philosophy:

The most patent expression of philosophy's historical fate is the way that the individual sciences compelled it to turn back into an individual science. If Kant had, as he put it, 'freed himself from the school concept of philosophy for its world concept', it has now perforce, regressed to its school concept. Whenever philosophers mistake that for the world concept, their pretensions grow ridiculous.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> 'Praxis, whose purpose is to produce a rational and politically mature humanity, remains under the spell of disaster unless it has a theory that can think the totality in its untruth. It goes without saying that this theory should not be a warmed-over idealism but rather must incorporate societal and political reality and its dynamic.' Adorno, 'Why Still Philosophy?', p.14.

<sup>56</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p.4.



This is both suggestive and problematic. It provides one of the few positive indications of an alternative concept of philosophy that Adorno seems to pursue against its specialisation.

However, Adorno provides no elaboration of this world-concept of philosophy. And, once we look at Kant's understanding of the concept it reveals an indebtedness to a systematic form of philosophy that Adorno opposes emphatically by the 'anti-system' that *Negative Dialectics* is to present.

### *Excursus: Kant's world-concept of philosophy*

Kant refers to the world-concept of philosophy in his most explicit and sustained discussions of the concept of philosophy in *Critique of Pure Reason*, in 'The Architectonic of Pure Reason', which provides chapter 3 of 'The Transcendental Doctrine of Method'. Kant defines 'architectonic' as 'the art of systems' [*die Kunst der Systeme*]<sup>57</sup>, and his determination of philosophy emerges as a particular, indeed, the supreme understanding of the concept of system. System is defined as, 'the unity of the manifold modes of knowing [*Erkenntnisse*] under one idea.'<sup>58</sup> According to Kant, systematic unity is what first raises ordinary cognition to the status of science. This process is understood as making a 'system' out of 'a mere aggregate of knowledge'. Kant understands the idea of a system to be provided by reason. It determines *a priori* the systematic unity as a 'whole'. As a whole, a system has an end and a form, which determine the scope and relation of its parts. The idea of this wholeness enables the assessment of whether something is missing or whether something should be external and therefore ensures the qualities of specificity and completeness. Kant describes the whole of a

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<sup>57</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (Philipp Reclam, Stuttgart, 1966); trans. N.K.Smith, *Critique of Pure Reason* (Macmillan Press, London, 1929), p.A832/B860. Translation altered.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid. p.A832/B860.

systematic unity by analogy to the organic metaphor of an animal body in order to stress the ultimate antipathy of systematic unity to aggregation:

The whole is thus organised [*gegliedert*] (*articulatio*) and not a heap [*gehäuft*] (*coacervatio*). It may grow from within (*per intussusceptionem*), but not by external addition (*per appositionem*). It is thus like an animal body, the growth of which is not by the addition of a new member, but by the rendering of each member, without change of proportion, stronger and more effective for its purposes.<sup>59</sup>

Kant's concept of system involves a schema, which he defines here as, 'a constituent manifold and an order of its parts, both of which must be determined *a priori* from the principle defined by its end'.<sup>60</sup> If this schema is devised 'empirically in accordance with the purposes that are contingently occasioned', then this provides a 'technical unity'. If it emerges from an idea and is therefore *a priori*, it provides an 'architectonic unity'. It is this architectonic unity that Kant claims is definitive of science [*Wissenschaft*]. Since all sciences are derived from an idea of reason, reason provides a common source for all sciences. This supreme unity is described as an, 'architectonic of all human knowledge [*Wissens*]'.

Kant claims that if we abstract from its content, all knowledge can be divided into two kinds: historical [*historische*] and rational. Historical knowledge is defined as '*cognitio ex datis*' [cognition from the given]. Rational knowledge is defined as '*cognitio ex principiis*' [cognition from principles]. Rational knowledge is characterised by its independence from being bound to knowledge that is given (and therefore historical). Rational knowledge is 'productive' and not 'imitative'. It is derived from universal principles and enables criticism and even rejection of the given. Kant makes it clear that even where knowledge has been rationally produced, if someone merely imitates or learns that knowledge without the ability

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid. p.A833/B861.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid. p.A833/B861.



to criticise, reject or argue for it, then this knowledge has become merely historical, at least for that individual. Kant proceeds to distinguish two kinds of knowledge arising from reason: philosophical knowledge derived through concepts and mathematical knowledge derived through the construction of concepts:

Mathematics, therefore, alone of all the sciences (*a priori*) arising from reason, can be learned; philosophy can never be learned, save only in historical fashion; as regards what concerns reason, we can at most learn to *philosophize*.<sup>61</sup>

It is important to register the differentiation of 'philosophy' from 'to philosophize', not least because there appear to be certain inconsistencies in Kant's account. Firstly, 'philosophy' is initially defined as 'the system of all philosophical knowledge'. This would suggest, according to the above quotation, that mathematical knowledge is external to philosophy. However, this would contradict Kant's adoption of a 'world concept' of philosophy, according to which, 'philosophy is the science of the relation of all knowledge to the essential ends of human reason (*teleologia rationis humanae*).'<sup>62</sup> Secondly, 'philosophy' is described as providing the archetype [*Urbild*] for the 'estimation of all attempts at philosophizing'. As an archetype, philosophy is the, 'mere idea of a possible science which nowhere exists *in concreto*....' Since, philosophy does not exist in actuality it does not exist as a given (that is 'historically') such that it can be learnt. However, contrary to the claim that 'philosophy can never be learned', Kant indicates that philosophy can ultimately be realized and hence learnt from:

...by many different paths, we endeavour to approximate [the idea of philosophy] until the one true path, overgrown by the products of sensibility, has been discovered, and the image, hitherto so abortive, has achieved likeness to the archetype, so far as

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid. p.A837/B865.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid. p.A839/B867.

this is granted to man. Till then we cannot learn philosophy; for where is it, who is in possession of it, and how shall we recognise it?<sup>63</sup>

Perhaps we should recognise in the delimiting phrase 'so far as this is granted to man' intimations of the theological character of Kant's idea of the realisation of philosophy here and therefore the extent to which philosophy is a regulative ideal for finite, human philosophizing.

In contrast to philosophy, philosophizing can be learnt according to Kant. It is defined as the:

...exercise of the talent of reason, in accordance with its universal principles, on certain actually existing attempts at philosophy, always, however, reserving the right of reason to investigate, to confirm, or to reject these principles in their very sources.<sup>64</sup>

Thus, philosophizing is not simply pure reasoning. It is the employment of reason in the critique of already given or 'historical' models of philosophy. In other words, it is the critical learning or critical imitation of past attempts at philosophy. Past philosophies present philosophising with an historical task. But, what kind of historical task?

Philosophy is described as an archetype [*Urbild*], that is, as an original model or image to be imitated or estimated. This archetype does not exist historically. All that exists historically are the various failed attempts to constitute philosophy (the various philosophies). Philosophizing is an historical task in the sense that it bases itself on previously established attempts at philosophy. However, these historical attempts at philosophy are not received as the archetype of philosophy itself. Rather, they provide the material through which the original idea or archetype of philosophy is mediated to philosophizing. Thus, philosophizing

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid. p.A838/B866.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid. p.A838/B866.



is an attempt to realise the archetype of philosophy with the aid of pre-existing philosophies. Philosophizing is a historically conditioned task that aspires to the destruction of its historicity. However, this characterization of philosophizing is still not without ambiguity. Kant implies that philosophy is realizable in the sense that it could overcome its historicity. Nonetheless, he also indicates a scepticism as to whether this is something possible for mortals. If philosophy remains a regulative ideal of philosophizing, then mortals must commit themselves to the inevitably historical nature of philosophizing as an infinite task. What sustains the historical nature of philosophizing is the ideal status of the archetype of philosophy. The ideality of philosophy ensures the unity of the task of philosophy. All philosophies, insofar as they are philosophies, are orientated towards the archetype of philosophy and while this archetype may be differently instantiated, these differences do not threaten the unified project of philosophy. Nonetheless, Kant appears to recognise that the precise character of philosophy's archetype is precarious prior to the projected ultimate establishment of philosophy. Thus, while Kant implies a fundamental definition of the archetype of philosophy as 'the system of all philosophical knowledge', he goes on to argue for a modification of this minimal definition with his outline of a 'world concept' of philosophy. This appears to perform something of the historical task of philosophizing: namely, identifying historical precedents of philosophy through which to engage in a process of critical learning.

Kant defines the 'world concept' of philosophy in distinction to a 'scholastic concept' of philosophy:

Hitherto<sup>65</sup> the concept of philosophy has been a merely *scholastic concept* – a concept of a system of knowledge which is sought solely in its character as a science, and

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<sup>65</sup> It is ambiguous as to whether 'Hitherto...' refers to Kant's own account up to this point in the text or to the history of philosophy up to Kant's present.

which has therefore in view only the systematic unity appropriate to science, and consequently no more than the *logical* perfection of knowledge. But there is likewise another concept of philosophy, a *world concept* [*Weltbegriff*] (*conceptus cosmicus*), which has always formed the real basis of the term 'philosophy', especially when it has been as it were personified and its archetype [*Urbild*] represented in the ideal *philosopher*. On this view, philosophy is the science [*Wissenschaft*] of the relation of all knowledge to the essential ends of human reason (*teleologia rationis humanae*), and the philosopher is not an artificer in the field of reason, but himself the lawgiver of human reason.<sup>66</sup>

Kant elaborates the 'world concept' of philosophy further in a footnote:

By 'world concept is here meant the concept which relates to that in which everyone necessarily has an interest; and accordingly if a science is to be regarded merely as one of the disciplines designed in view of certain optionally chosen ends, I must determine it in conformity with *scholastic concepts*.<sup>67</sup>

The indication of a transference of the archetype of philosophy to the philosopher is not as straightforward as the previous quotation implies. The philosopher is defined as, 'a teacher, in the ideal, who sets [the mathematician, the natural philosopher and the logician] their tasks, and employs them as instruments, to further the essential ends of human reason.'<sup>68</sup> However, Kant claims that this philosopher does not exist, as such. But the idea of his legislation – that is, to be a lawgiver rather than an artificer – is to be found in reason, which is to be found in every human. In view of the demand for complete systematic unity Kant stresses that it is not merely essential ends but the highest ends which can provide the principle of this unity, and

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid. pp.A838-9/B866-7.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid. p.A840/B868.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid. p.A839/B867.



that since it is moral philosophy which concerns itself with the highest ends, moral philosophy has superiority over all other preoccupations of reason.<sup>69</sup>

This model infuses Kant's definition of metaphysics. Metaphysics is defined as the 'systematic connection [of] the whole body (true as well as illusory) of philosophical knowledge.'<sup>70</sup> It is opposed to the 'propaedeutic' or 'critique' of pure reason. Kant also suggests the incorporation of critique in an expanded concept of metaphysics as the whole of pure philosophy. This still excludes both mathematical and empirical knowledge, which are subordinated to metaphysics in its concern with the 'supreme end, the happiness of all mankind.':

Metaphysics, alike of nature and of morals, and especially that criticism of our adventurous and self-reliant reason which serves as an introduction or propaedeutic to metaphysics, alone properly constitutes what may be entitled philosophy, in the strict sense of the term. Its sole preoccupation is wisdom; and it seeks it by the path of science.... Mathematics, natural science, even our empirical knowledge, have a high value as means, for the most part, to contingent ends, but also, in the ultimate outcome, to ends that are necessary and essential to humanity. This latter service, however, they can discharge only as they are aided by the knowledge through reason from pure concepts, which, however we may choose to entitle it, is really nothing but metaphysics.

For the same reason metaphysics is also the full and complete culture [*Kultur*] of human reason. Quite apart from its influence, as science, in connection with certain specific ends, it is an indispensable discipline. For in dealing with reason it treats of those elements and highest maxims which must form the basis of the very *possibility*

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<sup>69</sup> See *ibid.* p.A840/B868.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.* p.A841/B869.

of some sciences, and of the *use* of them all. That, as mere speculation, it serves rather to prevent errors than to extend knowledge, does not detract from its value. On the contrary this gives it dignity and authority, through that censorship which secures general order and harmony, and indeed the well-being of the scientific commonwealth, preventing those who labour courageously and fruitfully on its behalf from losing sight of the supreme end, the happiness of all mankind.<sup>71</sup>

### *World-concept of philosophizing*

Adorno's critique of philosophy as an autonomous, self-sufficient and therefore closed system, works at the destruction of the archetype of philosophy that regulates Kant's architectonic. But this archetype is already for Kant subject to a historical practice of philosophizing. The historical experience of decayed transcendent symbols which Benjamin diagnoses in the allegories of the German Baroque mourning play, reveals its deep resonance with Kant's philosophizing through historical philosophies in which the archetype of philosophy is imitated.<sup>72</sup> Adorno assumed Benjamin's philosophizing as his own, discerning in the historical experience of a decaying transcendence an antidote to idealism where it is mourned as lost and thereby experienced within the conditions of finitude. This infuses Adorno's programme of enlightenment's critical self-reflection, which, in secularising a mythic transcendence in the name of a culture of human happiness and freedom, must

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid. pp.A850-1/B878-9.

<sup>72</sup> See discussion of Adorno's relation to Benjamin below in chapters 6 and 7. Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* trans. J.Osborne (Verso, London, New York, 1977). Howard Caygill has insinuated this motif of 'philosophizing beyond philosophy' into the interpretation of Benjamin, but without elaborating its deep affinity to Kant's own development of philosophizing. See 'Philosophizing beyond philosophy', in Howard Caygill, *Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience* (Routledge, London, New York, 1998), pp.23-9.



prevent this conjuring up a new mythic immanence. The realization of freedom in the autonomous systems of philosophy was, for Adorno, emblematic of this reversion of enlightenment to myth. But Kant's world-concept of philosophy indicates a re-orientation of philosophizing towards a culture of reason as the happiness of all mankind, to which architectonic is subordinated under the threat of scholasticism. Kant's philosophizing therefore indicates an historical practice of enlightenment that is salvageable from the ruins of the regulative ideal of system; a practice that resonates with Adorno's attempt to salvage a culture of happiness and freedom from the ruined architecture of systematic philosophy. Philosophizing the world-concept of philosophy can therefore be interpreted as Adorno once characterised Kant's dictum that only the critical path is the only one still open to us: it 'belongs to those propositions constituting a philosophy that proves itself because the propositions, as fragments, survive beyond the system that conceived them.'<sup>73</sup>

Philosophizing, broken away from the decaying regulating idea of systematic philosophy, is transformed from a passive consequence of this destruction, into an active participation in this destruction: a philosophizing beyond philosophy. The 'anti-system' that Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* was to provide reveals in its dedication to a world-concept of philosophy, an obscure code which, when deciphered, reads something like 'a world-concept of philosophizing'.

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<sup>73</sup> 'Kants berühmtes Diktum, der kritische Weg sei allein noch offen, gehört zu jenen Sätzen, in denen die Philosophie, aus der sie stamen, die Probe besteht, indem sie, als Bruchstücke, das System überdauern.' Adorno, 'Wozu noch Philosophie' GS.vol.10.2, p.461; 'Why Still Philosophy?', p.7.

## Chapter 4

**Presentation**

For Adorno, 'the presentation [*Darstellung*] of philosophy is not an external matter of indifference to it but immanent to its idea.'<sup>1</sup> Presentation is not to be trivialised as an ornamental or supplementary aspect of style, whether that is pursued in the aestheticised concern for rhetoric or instrumentally as the demand for simplicity and clarity of communication. Presentation is to be understood substantively, in terms of how it contributes to the formation of philosophy and its elements. The question of philosophy's presentation is therefore essentially the question of how and why a philosophy takes the form that it does and forms its elements the way it does. Posing the question of philosophical presentation opens up a discourse of critical reflection on philosophical form – a metaphilosophical discourse we might characterise as philosophical morphology – in which reflection on 'intra-philosophical' questions of the formal character of philosophy's elements, is extended to, and combined with, reflection on 'extra-philosophical' questions of the form that philosophy takes in relation to broader non-philosophical forms. The division of labour to which philosophy is subject, already implicitly elaborates the problem of philosophical presentation.<sup>2</sup>

Adorno's reflection on philosophical presentation is not novel per se. It is a perennial quality of philosophical self-reflection, particularly in the development of new forms of presentation. Kant's critique of dogmatism involves a rejection of the appropriateness of mathematical axiomatization as inappropriate to the form of specifically philosophical

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<sup>1</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialektik* p.29/ Translation p.18.

<sup>2</sup> See chapter 3, above.



concepts.<sup>3</sup> The Jena Romantics, in particular Friedrich Schlegel, extended this rejection of axiomatization through the development of the essentially fragmented process of philosophical presentation.<sup>4</sup> Hegel's critique of Kant's methodologism involves the development of the 'philosophical proposition' or 'speculative proposition' as a form in which the externality and fixity of philosophical conceptualisation is sublated.<sup>5</sup> Marx draws attention to the distinction of the method of inquiry and the method of presentation in order to explain his 'inversion' of Hegel's dialectical method.<sup>6</sup> Adorno inherits this lineage of critiques of philosophical presentation through the decisive mediating influence of Benjamin.<sup>7</sup> The result is a combination of concerns and developments: the extension of the critique of axiomatic systematisation into a critique of the form of the system as such; the

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<sup>3</sup> Immanuel Kant, 'The Discipline of Pure Reason in Respect of its Dogmatic Employment', *Critique of Pure Reason*, pp.A712-38/B740-66.

<sup>4</sup> See Friedrich Schlegel, 'Critical Fragments' and 'Athenaeum Fragments' in *Philosophical Fragments* trans. P.Firchow (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, London, 1991), pp.1-16 and pp.18-93.

<sup>5</sup> G.W.F.Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V.Miller (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1977), pp.38-9.

<sup>6</sup> Marx writes in the 'Afterword' to the second German edition of *Capital* vol.1:

Of course the method of presentation must differ in form from that of inquiry. The latter has to appropriate the material in detail, to analyse its different forms of development, to trace out their inner connexion. Only after this work is done, can the actual movement be adequately described. If this is done successfully, if the life of the subject-matter is ideally reflected as in a mirror, then it may appear as if we had before us a mere a priori construction.

Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol.1, trans. S.Moore and E.Aveling (Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1954), p.28. This distinction between 'presentation' and 'inquiry' elaborates Marx's 'inversion' of Hegel's dialectic, since it draws attention to the extent to which the presentation of ideas is secondary to an inquiry into the real world. It thereby enables Marx to use Hegel's dialectical form of presentation without presupposing its idealism.

<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, Walter Benjamin's discussion of philosophical presentation in the 'Epistemo-Critical Prologue' to *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* trans. J.Osborne (Verso, London, New York, 1977).

development of this critique through the elaboration of the essentially linguistic form of philosophical concepts; the elaboration of the historical constitution of philosophical language; and, moreover, the materialist or anti-idealist experience of history to which philosophical language is subject to.<sup>8</sup>

## Language

It is misleading for Habermas et al to accuse Adorno of failing to have recognised the linguistic turn in recent philosophy. This accusation only makes sense if this linguistic turn is understood in terms of a simultaneous turn to intersubjectivity; furthermore, an intersubjectivity absolved of the question of its constitutive relation to nature.<sup>9</sup> Since, for Adorno: 'Philosophy – if it really is philosophy and not philology or a bare mechanical play – is essentially language: that means presentation [*Darstellung*].'<sup>10</sup> Adorno's elaboration of the linguistic character of philosophical concepts involves the extension of the critique of mathematical symbolisation, that is introduced by Kant's critique of dogmatism. The departure of Adorno's work, following Benjamin, is the extension of the linguistic presentation of philosophical concepts to a recognition of the historical and material constitution of philosophical concepts, with the consequence of destroying system as the principle of form, which remains, albeit problematically, the morphological principle of Kant's philosophy. This is enforced through an insistence on the historical constitution of the linguistic character of philosophical concepts. Recognising this historical dimension transforms the critique of dogmatism, exposing Kant's recognition of the indeterminacy of philosophical concepts as a blind intimation of the historical constitution of philosophical

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<sup>8</sup> See below, but also chapter 6.

<sup>9</sup> See section 'Excursus: From metaphysical to postmetaphysical thinking' in chapter 1, above.

<sup>10</sup> Adorno, *Philosophische Terminologie* vol.1, p.56.



concepts. This radicalises Kant's critique. The transhistorical claims of philosophical concepts are revealed to be a latent continuation of dogmatism. The critique of philosophical dogmatism is therefore transformed from a critique of theological and mathematical symbolisation, to a critique of ahistorical symbolization. The interpretation of the historical dimension of philosophical concepts through attention to their linguistic character – that which is repressed or cut away in the attempt to secure a concept's meaning from its entwinement in rhetoric, its aesthetic dimension – now becomes central to the critique of philosophy.<sup>11</sup> Recognition of the historical constitution of concepts avoids scepticism of all truth claims, by recognising the historical constitution of truth. The sceptical response to historicisation betrays a latent insistence that the only truth is transhistorical. Adorno renders philosophy's claim to truth as historical and the interpretation of this historical truth is bound to the interpretation of philosophy's language.<sup>12</sup> An historical hermeneutics of language becomes central to philosophical critique for Adorno;<sup>13</sup> and central to his elaboration of a historical materialist dialectics.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> 'It is in the rhetorical quality that culture, society and tradition animate the thought...' Adorno, *Negative Dialektik* p.66/Translation p.56.

<sup>12</sup> 'Philosophical language which intends truth knows no signs [*Signa*]. Through language history takes part in truth and the words are never mere marks [*Zeichen*] of what is thought under them. Rather, in the words history breaks in, forming those truth characteristics [*Wahrheitscharaktere*], the part of history in the word that determines the choice of each word as such, because history and truth meet in the word.' Adorno, 'Thesen über die Sprache des Philosophen', GS. Bd.1, pp.366-7.

<sup>13</sup> 'All philosophical critique is today only possible as language critique.' Ibid. p.369.

<sup>14</sup> Marx and Engels had in fact indicated a critique of language as the consequence of his critique of philosophy as a one-sided preoccupation with consciousness:

The 'mind' is from the outset afflicted by the curse of being 'burdened' with matter, which here makes its appearance in the form of agitated layers of air, sounds, in short, of language. Language is as old as consciousness, language is practical, real consciousness that exists for other men as well, and only therefore does it also exist for me; language, like consciousness, only arises from the need, the necessity, of intercourse with other men.

Adorno's historical conception of philosophical language becomes the source for his critique of Hegel. Hegel pursued Kant's critique of dogmatism, radicalising it to include a critique of mathematics. However, his critique of Kant's methodologism recovers an emphatic claim to absolute conceptual determination abandoned by Kant's critical philosophy. This enables Hegel's conception of philosophical presentation to propose the complete demonstration of thought, rather than merely its representation.<sup>15</sup> Adorno's critique of Hegel's idealism – of the attribution to the concept the ability to fully present the object in thought – is premised on the critique of its non-linguistic character:

...Hegelian dialectics was a dialectics without language, while the most literal sense of the word 'dialectics' postulates language; to this extent, Hegel remained an adept of current science. He did not need language in an emphatic sense, since everything, even the speechless and opaque, was to him to be spirit, and the spirit would be the context.<sup>16</sup>

Insisting on the linguistic nature of the concept involves acknowledging that complete demonstration is beyond it. The concept cannot exhibit the freedom of the object in thought, as Hegel proposes. It expresses the object through the presentation of its lack of freedom in determining the object, that is, through acknowledging the limit the non-conceptual presents for the concept. As the experience of this lack of freedom it is linked, for Adorno, to an experience of suffering which is thereby made essential to conceptual articulation. This

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*The German Ideology* Collected Works vol.5 (Lawrence and Wishart/ Progress Publishers, Moscow, London, 1976), pp.43-4.

<sup>15</sup> 'It is the business of the Logic... to present the thoughts that are merely represented, and which as such are not comprehended nor demonstrated, as stages of self-determining thinking, so that these thoughts come to be both comprehended and demonstrated.' Hegel, *Encyclopaedia Logic* p.189.

<sup>16</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialektik* p.165/Translation, p.163.



mournful constitution of philosophical language<sup>is</sup> its disillusionment at not being capable of conceptualising the non-conceptual absolutely:

Freedom follows the subject's urge to express itself. The need to lend a voice to suffering is a condition of all truth. For the suffering is objectivity that weighs upon the subject; its most subjective experience is objectively conveyed....[Philosophy's] integral, nonconceptually mimetic moment of expression is objectified only by presentation in language. The freedom of philosophy is nothing but the capacity to lend a voice to its unfreedom.<sup>17</sup>

Philosophical presentation and therefore philosophical language is consequently defined by the paradoxical or impossible task of expressing the unexpressible: 'to counter Wittgenstein by uttering the unutterable.'<sup>18</sup> Adorno therefore rejects the idea that the linguistic character of philosophy is a limitation of philosophy to what can be properly expressed linguistically, as if language were a new transcendental canon of logic. Philosophical language is characterised by the consciousness of the limits of its linguistic character.<sup>19</sup> Philosophical language is therefore speculative, but in a sense distinct from Hegelian speculation.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid. p.29/Translation p.18.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. p.29/Translation p.9.

<sup>19</sup> Thus, while Adorno maintains that 'language constitutes thought no less than thought language', (Theodor W. Adorno, *Metaphysics: Concept and Problem*, trans. E.Jephcott (Polity Press, Cambridge, 2000), p.123), he does not claim that language is therefore a simple restriction to what can be thought:

It is true that we can only speak in a way which is mediated through language, but for that reason language itself, as one phenomenon among others, becomes a part of reality as a whole, a moment of reality, and should not be hypostatized over against it. It is in the nature of language that we can speak of an absolutely formless matter, even though *speaking* of formless matter is itself a form. It is as if we were in a prison of language but were able to recognise it as a prison.

...I believe that philosophizing begins exactly at the point...where one refuses to be fobbed off with curt pronouncements such as that matter as a 'primary concept' or 'first

*Sign, image, concept*

The full scope of Adorno's understanding of language and therefore the specific relation that philosophy has to language, only really becomes clear once we consider it in its most fundamental exposition. This is developed perhaps most extensively in the broad anthropological scope of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which introduces language as central to the constitution of rationality and subjectivity. Here language is understood to emerge from the primal attempt to overcome fear by controlling it through a unified system of representation, in which powerlessness is converted into power through knowledge of what made the subject powerless, that is, of what created the fear. Language is hereby identified with the (speculative) origin of reason and subjectivity as an attempt to gain power over nature through its representation. The internalisation of this feared power or violence within the subject, as the subject's representation of the world, reveals an economy of domination that persists in the development of reason. This is the target of a critical self-reflection of enlightenment, which seeks to expose and thereby absolve the structure of domination sublimated in reason and the constitution of the subject. Without this critical self-reflection, the classical project of the enlightenment – the attempt to overcome domination by unknown forces of nature – renews what it ostensibly seeks to free itself from: the persistence of blind subordination to domination or myth.

Within this context Adorno and Horkheimer describe language more specifically as the attempt to understand the world in terms of an essence that stands behind and controls its appearances. This is its sacred character, emerging through the experience of fear as

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principle' is itself a form, so that the concept of formless matter is meaningless; one actually starts thinking at such points and reflects further on them.

Ibid. p.68.



subjection to a power or deity. Language is therefore defined by a paradox that things are not only what they appear to be:

When the tree is no longer approached merely as tree, but as evidence for an Other, as the location of *mana*, language expresses the contradiction that something is itself and at one and the same time something other than itself, identical and not identical.

Through the deity, language is transformed from tautology into language.<sup>20</sup>

Acquisition of the knowledge of this deity, of the ability to read its language, imbibes its power. Subjection, knowledge and power are therefore fused in language. The sacred origin of language emerges mimetically, according to Adorno and Horkheimer, in forms such as the magical fetish. The fetish is characterized here by its inability to abstract from the object it wants to represent. This is exemplified by need for the fetish to literally have something of the object in order to represent it, such as using someone's hair in order to represent them. Representation is achieved through a kind of metonymic transubstantiation, which is unable to abstract fully from what it represents. This primitive mimesis is contrasted critically with the development of complete abstraction from the object to be represented, in which the need to have something of the object it seeks to represent has dissolved.

Adorno and Horkheimer do not propose this primitive mimesis as simply the truth that has been lost by the development of reason and which needs to be recovered as it was. Rather, it makes explicit the entwinement of representation and domination that is subsequently suppressed by the generalization of domination into a necessary and universal principle of representation.<sup>21</sup> The evolution of abstract representation is understood in terms

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<sup>20</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialektik der Aufklärung* pp.31-2/Translation p.15. Adorno and Horkheimer associate this emergent paradox with Hubert and Mauss's concept of sympathy or mimesis in their 'Théorie général de la Magie', *L'Année Sociologique*, 1902-3. See fn.20, p.15.

<sup>21</sup> 'Magic is utterly untrue, yet in it domination is not yet negated by transforming itself into the pure truth and acting as the very ground of the world that has become subject to it.... In magic there is

of the development of a divergence of language's primitive function of representation into the complementary aspects of sign and image. The symbol and hieroglyph are identified as two forms of language in which this divergence of sign and image have not yet been dissociated:

The doctrine of the priests was symbolic in the sense that in it sign and image were one. Just as hieroglyphs bear witness, so the word too originally had a pictorial function, which was transferred to myths. Like magical rites, myths signify self-repetitive nature, which is the core of the symbolic: a state of being or process that is presented as eternal, because it incessantly becomes actual once more by being realized in symbolic form. Inexhaustibility, unending renewal and the permanence of the signified [*bedeuteten*] are not mere attributes of all symbols, but their essential content.<sup>22</sup>

This splitting of sign and image is institutionalised through the division of labour between science and art respectively:

With the clean separation of science and poetry, the division of labour it had helped to effect was extended to language. For science the word is the sign [*Zeichen*]: as sound, image and word proper [*eigentliches Wort*] it is distributed among the different arts, and is not permitted to reconstitute itself by their addition, by synesthesia, or in the

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specific representation [*spezifische Vertretbarkeit*]. What happens to the enemy's spear, hair or name, also happens to the individual; the sacrifice is massacred instead of the god....The world of magic retained distinctions whose traces have disappeared even in linguistic form [*Sprachform*]. The multitudinous affinities [*Affinitäten*] between existents are suppressed by the single relation between the subject who bestows meaning and the meaningless object, between rational signification and the chance vehicle of significance. On the magical plane, dream and image were not mere signs for the thing in question, but were bound up with it by similarity or names. The relation is one not of intention but of kinship [*Verwandtschaft*]. Like science, magic pursues aims, but seeks to achieve them by mimesis, not in progressive distance from the object.' Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung* pp.25-7/ Translation, pp.9-11.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. p.33/ Translation, p.17.



composition of the *Gesamtkunst*. As sign, language is required to resign itself to calculation in order to know nature, and must discard the claim to be like it. As image, it is required to resign itself to mirror-imagery in order to be nature entire, and must discard the claim to know it.<sup>23</sup>

Philosophy's relation to language is constituted by the critique of both the exclusive separation of sign and image, and their conflation. It is therefore critical of the disciplines instituted around this separation or conflation. Adorno and Horkheimer refer to Logical Positivism and aestheticism as consequences of the exclusive separation between sign and image; and Schelling's concept of the artwork and the enlightenment's concept of faith as consequences of their conflation.<sup>24</sup> Philosophy is distinguished by the task of critically rendering the relation of sign and image.<sup>25</sup> The attempt to critically render the truth of this relation of image and sign forges the idea of a dialectical philosophy, consisting of the development of dialectical concepts in which the scientific (or sign quality) and the artistic (or image quality) are mediated in and as its linguistic nature. Dialectical concepts are not just sign's insofar as they do not forego their image quality, even if as concepts they are closer to signs than to images and are meaningful more through what they indicate than what they are like. Dialectical concepts are therefore characterised by this attempt to overcome their bias towards signs, without suppressing their limitations as such. This lack of symmetry explains Adorno's anxious resistance to the conflation of philosophy and science – at least as it is

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid. p.34/ Translation, pp.17-8.

<sup>24</sup> See ibid. pp.34-5/Translation, pp.18-9.

<sup>25</sup> 'The separation of sign and image is unavoidable [*abwendbar*]. Should however unsuspecting self-satisfaction cause it once again to become hypostatized, then each of the two isolated principles tends toward the destruction of truth.

Philosophy had already discerned the gulf which opened with that separation in the relation of intuition and concept and tries in vain to close it again: indeed it defines itself through this attempt.' Ibid. p.35/ Translation (altered) p.18.

understood here, as the realm of signification – and his eagerness to draw attention to the association of philosophy with art – as the realm of the image – without conflating philosophy and art.<sup>26</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer characterise philosophy's relation to language in terms of a practice of writing and reading of script. This articulates the linguistic or hermeneutic transformation of Hegel's dialectics and the form of critical self-reflection that is implicated.<sup>27</sup> Determinate negation is understood as a form of reading and writing in which both images and signs are configured in such a way that their one-sidedness is revealed, thereby subjecting the internalisation of domination to critical self-reflection.<sup>28</sup> Philosophizing consists in this writing of texts and reading of images.

### **Excursus: Kant's critique of dogmatism**

Kant's critique of dogmatism is elaborated most extensively, at least in terms of its consequences for the form of philosophical concepts, in 'The Discipline of Pure Reason in its Dogmatic Employment' in *Critique of Pure Reason*.<sup>29</sup> Here Kant makes clear that his critique of dogmatism does not seek to completely de-legitimise its form of reasoning, but rather to

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<sup>26</sup> See sections 'Not science' and 'Not art' in chapter 3, above.

<sup>27</sup> 'This pursuit of 'determinate negation' does not receive from the sovereignty of the abstract concept any immunity against the corrupting intuition, as does scepticism, to which both true and false are equally vain. Determinate negation rejects the defective ideas of the absolute, the idols, differently than does the rigorism, which confronts them with the idea that they cannot match up to. Dialectic, on the contrary, interprets every image as writing [*Schrift*]. It shows how the admission of its falsity is to be read in the lines of its features – a confession that deprives it of its power and appropriates it for truth.' Ibid. pp.40-1/ Translation p.24.

<sup>28</sup> See Miriam Bratu Hansen, 'Mass Culture as Hieroglyphic Writing: Adorno, Derrida, Kracauer' in ed. M.Pensky, *The Actuality of Adorno: Essays on Adorno and the Postmodern* (SUNY Press, New York, 1997), pp.83-111. Hansen does not grasp the full scope of Adorno's concept of philosophical writing as dialectical negation of the relation of image and sign, rather than as a particular orientation towards hieroglyphic language. See section 'Constellations', below.

<sup>29</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, pp.A712-38/B741-66.



limit it to its proper employment within mathematics. Dogmatism is therefore the attempt to achieve apodeictic certainty through the mis-employment of philosophical concepts as if they were mathematical concepts. This is essentially the methodological objection Kant mobilises against the philosophies of Descartes, Spinoza and latterly Wolff. As a problem requiring a 'discipline of pure reason', it is treated as an habitual transgression of reason and therefore has the form of a dialectical illusion.<sup>30</sup>

Kant's critique of dogmatism proceeds from a strict distinction between philosophical and mathematical forms of reasoning from concepts: '*Philosophical* knowledge is the *knowledge gained by reason from concepts*; mathematical knowledge is the knowledge gained by reason from the *construction* [*Konstruktion*] of concepts.'<sup>31</sup> This distinguishing quality of construction in mathematical knowledge means, 'to *present* [*darstellen*] *a priori* the intuition which corresponds to the concept.'<sup>32</sup> Construction therefore involves a '*non-empirical* intuition'<sup>33</sup>, and hence the possibility of apodeictic knowledge. Philosophy reasons through concepts which do not present their intuitions *a priori*, but which must rely on experience. Consequently, they are not able to claim apodeictic knowledge through reasoning

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<sup>30</sup> '...where neither empirical nor pure intuition keeps reason to a visible track, when, that is to say, reason is being considered in its transcendental employment, in accordance with mere concepts, it stands so greatly in need of a discipline, to restrain its tendency towards extension beyond the narrow limits of possible experience and to guard it against extravagance and error, that the whole philosophy of pure reason has no other than this strictly negative utility. Particular errors can be got rid of by *censure*, and their causes by *criticism*. But where, as in the case of pure reason, we come upon a whole system of illusions and fallacies, intimately bound together and united under common principles, a quite special negative legislation seems to be required, erecting a system of precautions and self-examination under the title of a *discipline*, founded on the nature of reason and the objects of its pure employment...' Ibid. p.A711/B739.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. p.A713/B741.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. p.A713/B741.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. p.A713/B741.

from concepts alone. Insofar as philosophy makes this claim, it mis-employs *mathemata*, or apodeictic propositions proper to mathematical construction, and generates the dialectical illusion of *dogmata*.<sup>34</sup>

Kant identifies three different forms of dogmatism or *dogmata*, corresponding to three different forms of *mathemata*: definitions, axioms and demonstrations. Definition is defined as follows: 'To *define*...really only means to present the complete, original concept of a thing within the limits of its concept.'<sup>35</sup> These attributes are elaborated in a footnote:

Completeness means clearness and sufficiency of characteristics; by *limits* is meant the precision shown in there not being more of these characteristics than belong to the complete concept; by *original* is meant that this determination of these limits is not derived from anything else, and therefore does not require any proof; for if it did, that would disqualify the supposed explanation from standing at the head of all the judgements regarding its object.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> 'I divide all apodictic propositions...into *dogmata* and *mathemata*. A synthetic proposition directly derived from concepts is a *dogma*; a synthetic proposition, when directly obtained through the construction of concepts, is a *mathema*. Analytic judgements really teach us nothing more about the object than what the concept of which we have of it already contains; they do not extend our knowledge beyond the concept of the object, but only clarify the object. They cannot therefore rightly be called dogmas.... Now in the whole domain of pure reason, in its merely speculative employment, there is not to be found a single synthetic judgement directly derived from concepts. For, as we have shown, ideas cannot form the basis of any objectively valid synthetic judgement. Through concepts of understanding pure reason does, indeed establish secure principles, not however directly from concepts alone, but always only indirectly through relation of these concepts to something altogether contingent, namely, *possible experience*. When such experience (that is, something as object of possible experiences) is presupposed, these principles are indeed apodictically certain; but in themselves, directly, they can never be known *a priori*.' Ibid. p.A736/B764.

<sup>35</sup> Definieren soll...eignetlich nur so viel bedeuten, als, den ausführlichen Begriff eines Dinges innerhalb seiner Grenzen ursprünglich darstellen.' Ibid. p.A727/B755.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. p.A728/B756.



Kant makes clear that according to these criteria there can be, strictly speaking, no philosophical definitions, because philosophy's employment of concepts does not allow the complete and original presentation of the concept of a thing within its limits, either in the case of empirical concepts, or concepts given *a priori*. Philosophical concepts are bound to experience in order to achieve knowledge of their object and this experience cannot, strictly speaking, be defined. Kant characterizes philosophy's relation to its concepts as a matter of 'exposition' rather than definition, according to which concepts are treated as valid up to a certain point, without assuming complete validity.<sup>37</sup> But he resists censuring the use of the word 'definition' because of its ambiguous equivalence with a range of other words and thereby implicitly refers to the faulty and discursive character of philosophy's relation to definition. Kant implies that the goal of apodictic certainty may still be achieved, but at the end of a process of enquiry, rather than at the beginning: 'In short the definition in all its precision and clarity ought, in philosophy, to come rather at the end than at the beginning of our enquiries.'<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> In a striking footnote Kant makes clear that philosophy is plagued with faulty definitions:

Philosophy is full of faulty definitions, especially of definitions which, while indeed containing some of the elements required, are yet not complete. If we could make no use of a concept till we had defined it, all philosophy would be in a pitiable plight. But since a good and safe use can still be made of the elements obtained by analysis so far as they go, defective definitions, that is, propositions which are properly not definitions, but are yet true, and are therefore approximations to definitions, can be employed with great advantage. In mathematics definition belongs *ad esse*, in philosophy *ad melius esse*. It is desirable to attain an adequate definition, but often very difficult to. The jurists are still without a definition of their concept of right.

Ibid. p.A731/B759.

<sup>38</sup> *CPR*, p.588.

Axioms and demonstrations involve essentially similar critiques. Axioms are characterised as 'immediately certain...synthetic *a priori* principles.'<sup>39</sup> Mathematically, axiomatic immediacy is achieved through the construction of concepts, in which the intuition of the object of a concept is presented immediately. Axioms are therefore intuitive principles. Philosophically, axiomatic immediacy is an illusion, insofar as reasoning from concepts, without their construction, requires experience. Philosophy can therefore only establish principles discursively through a deduction.<sup>40</sup> As far as demonstrations are concerned: 'An apodeictic proof can be called a demonstration, only insofar as it is intuitive.' Once again this is achieved through the construction of concepts. Philosophical proofs depend on experience and are therefore distinguished by their open-ended and discursive character in which they are submitted to the negotiation of their linguistic constitution. Kant refers to them as '*acroamatic*' proofs, 'since they may be conducted by the agency of words alone (the object in thought)...'<sup>41</sup>

Kant's critique of dogmatism introduces not only the rejection of the mathematical forms of presentation developed by rationalism, but generates a new form of systematic presentation and therefore a new concept of system. The qualities he attributes to the presentation of specifically philosophical concepts – open-ended, provisional, discursive, *acroamatic*, bound to experience, linguistic; qualities which resonate with the recognition of the historical form of philosophical reasoning or philosophizing – are not only incompatible with the model of system derived from geometric axiomatization. Insofar as they reject the alternative of a mere aggregation of elements, they simultaneously develop a form of relation

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid. p.A732/B760.

<sup>40</sup> Kant explains his inclusion of axioms of intuition in the principles of pure understanding as a consequence of the need to demonstrate the possibility of mathematics, which transcendental philosophy must include, without endorsing it as a method proper to philosophy. See p.A733/B762.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. p.A735/B763.



or unity in which these non-dogmatic forms of presentation are realised in a new, organic model of system.<sup>42</sup> Rather than a system premised on the foundation of a set of privileged axioms, which remain unchanged in their extension or application; an organic concept of system is generated in which elements are part of a complex, changing and open-ended inter-relationship, the essence of which is revealed through each of its parts rather than merely in one, foundational part of it.

This indication of a new concept of system would become fundamental for the development of Romanticism and German Idealism, a development which would be extended into a critique of Kant's critical philosophy. In Hegel, who, for Adorno at least, produces the most radical development<sup>of</sup> this transformation of system, Kant's critique of dogmatism is extended to the critique of the abstractness of mathematics itself.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, it is extended to a critique of the very separation of analytic and dialectical logic in Kant.<sup>44</sup> This

<sup>42</sup> See section 'World-concept of philosophy' in chapter 3, above.

<sup>43</sup> 'The notion that mathematics *constructs* its *concepts* became current through the influence of Kant; [but] this only means that mathematics does *not* deal with *concepts at all*, but with abstract determinations of *sensible intuitions*.' G.W.F.Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic*, trans. T.F.Geraets, W.A.Suchting and H.S.Harris (Hackett, Indianapolis, Cambridge, 1991), pp.299-300. The axioms of mathematics therefore conceal their abstract assumption of their object. In geometry for, instance, 'geometrical objects are abstract determinations of space; the underlying abstraction, so-called absolute space, has lost all further determinations and now possesses only such shapes and configurations as are posited within it. These objects therefore *are* only what they are *meant* to be; their Notion-determination in general, and more precisely the specific difference, possesses in them its simple unhindered reality.' G.W.F.Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, trans. A.V.Miller (Hummanities Press, New Jersey, 1969, 1989), p.798.

<sup>44</sup> 'The philosophical method is both analytic and synthetic, but not in the sense of a mere juxtaposing or mere alteration of both of these methods of finite cognition; instead, the philosophical method contains them sublated within itself, and therefore it behaves, in every one of its movement, analytically and synthetically at the same time. Philosophical thinking proceeds analytically in that it simply takes up its object, the Idea, and lets it go its own way, while it simply watches the movement and development of it, so to speak. To this extent philosophising is wholly passive. But philosophical

enables the development of a speculative systematic philosophy in which the claim to absoluteness, or apodeictic certainty, can be recovered from dogmatism, but in a new form.<sup>45</sup>

### Anti-system

Adorno's relation to Kant's critique of dogmatism does not follow Hegel all the way into a new elaboration of absolutely systematic philosophy. Through Nietzsche, Adorno perceives within Kant's critique of dogmatism, a far-reaching critique, not only of axiomatic systematisation, but the principle of system as such. Adorno's critique of *prima philosophia* extends to a critique of the general aspiration to a self-sufficient philosophy, and diagnoses the principle of system as fundamental to the idealism of this form of philosophy. Kant's critique of dogmatism is diagnosed as the tentative beginnings of the destruction of systematic philosophy, which Adorno's declaration of *Negative Dialectics* as an 'anti-system' seeks to follow through more radically.<sup>46</sup>

Adorno's critique of system is complex. It is directed at system as an autonomous, self-sufficient and thereby closed form, founded on its immanence, to which transcendence or externality is either subsumed or excluded. However, Adorno does not want to dissolve the forms of complex determination generated through the concept of system; a project he discerns in Nietzsche: '...there belongs a wholly different power and agility to what establishes itself in an incomplete system with freely unenclosed prospects, than to a

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thinking is equally synthetic as well, and it proves to be the activity of the Concept itself.' Hegel, *Encyclopaedia Logic*, p.305.

<sup>45</sup> For a deeper elaboration of Hegel's speculative critique of Kant see sub-section 'From an organon of semblance to an organon of absolute knowledge' in chapter 5, below.

<sup>46</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialektik* p.10/ Translation p.xx.



dogmatic world.’<sup>47</sup> Adorno remains our contemporary, insofar as he did not assume the cultural authority of systematic philosophy. His critique of it is not made in the face of its dominance, but its decline, and it is concerned to salvage what remains of value from its suppression. This concerns the absoluteness with which the form of the system was infused, in contrast to the systematic injunction typical of the positive sciences, which appeals to be systematic in the highly limited form of an ordering of data for coherence or clarity, or the interpretation of totality through a system that structures or articulates the totality without determining it absolutely. Adorno’s criticism of systematic philosophy does not attempt to affirm either its renewal within the sciences or its reversal into arbitrariness, nor does he seek to retrieve it as it is. In the manner of Benjamin’s destructive historiography, he treats it as a ruin, which, as ruined, releases potentialities that are suppressed within its original form. The critique of system therefore becomes the remembrance of the coherence of the non-identical – the recognition of the non-identical as not just an arbitrary or irrational excess – that was repressed with the idea of an absolute system as a principle of identity; as a principle of the transcendental subject.<sup>48</sup> Adorno therefore extends the deconstruction of system as a principle of identity, which had already been registered by Kant in the differentiation of ‘systematic’ reasoning and a ‘system’ of reason, but which was limited by his commitment to the system

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<sup>47</sup> ‘es gehört eine ganz verschiedene Kraft und Beweglichkeit dazu, in einem unvollendeten System, mit frien unabgeschlossenen Aussichten, sich festzuhalten, als in einer dogmatischen Welt.’ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. IX, (München, 1923), p.361; quoted in Adorno, *Philosophische Terminologie*, vol.1, p.26.

<sup>48</sup> ‘The conception of the system recalls, in reversed form, in the coherence of the nonidentical, that which is violated by deductive systematics. Criticism of systems and asystematic thought are superficial as long as they cannot release the cohesive force which the idealistic systems had signed over to the transcendental subject.’ Ibid. p.36/Translation (altered) p.26.

provided by the subject as the organon of thinking.<sup>49</sup> The destruction of system leaves, in the memory invoked by its ruined monuments, the fragments of an alternative form of philosophical presentation.

### Constellations

Philosophical concepts do not present their object, the non-conceptual, immediately. Philosophizing presents the non-conceptual indirectly or discursively, through the combination of a plurality of different concepts, which attempt to present the non-conceptual through their inter-relation. The experience of non-identity revealed in the failure of the concept to sufficiently identify the non-conceptual, informs a process of combining inadequate concepts with other concepts that attempt, from different vantages, to conceptualise the non-conceptual; attempting, through their combination, to say what they could not individually. Through these combinations, or, 'constellations', an emphatic claim to truth, comparable to the ontological force of the sacred name, is sustained without a delusive claim to immediacy: 'The determinable flaw in every concept makes it necessary to cite others; this is the font of the only constellations which inherited something of the hope of the name. The language of philosophy approaches that name by denying it.'<sup>50</sup> The model for this is not mathematical axiomatization, but language insofar as it is essentially distinct from any

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<sup>49</sup> 'Now if in the speculative employment of pure reason there are no dogmas to serve as its special subject-matter, all *dogmatic* methods, whether borrowed from the mathematician or specially invented, are as such inappropriate. For they only serve to conceal defects and errors, and to mislead philosophy, whose true purpose is to present every step of reason in the clearest light. Nevertheless its method can always be *systematic*. For our reason is itself, subjectively, a system, though in its pure employment, by means of concepts, it is no more than a system whereby our investigations can be conducted in accordance with principles of unity, the material being provided by *experience* alone.' Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, p.A737-8/B765-6.

<sup>50</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialektik* p.62/ Translation p.53.



immediate presentation of what it seeks to communicate.<sup>51</sup> Constellations attempt to reveal the interior of an object through a combination of concepts, which, from the outside, as it were, try to present the relations in which an object stands and, thereby, the relations through which the object is itself constituted.

Constellations generate what Adorno refers to as 'models'. Models are the product of constellations; they are the forms generated through thinking in constellations. Adorno's concept of model is obscure. He describes models as replacing the actualisation of philosophy through the example as a mere illustration of an idea. Models are the working out of the actuality of the idea. '[Models] are not examples; they do not simply elucidate general reflections.... [They are] opposed to the use of examples which Plato introduced and philosophy repeated ever since: as matters of indifference in themselves.'<sup>52</sup> Nor are models merely abstractive: 'A model covers the specific, and more than the specific, without letting it evaporate in its more general super-concept.'<sup>53</sup> The generation of models as constellations of concepts is the unit for philosophy as a whole, which is composed of a constellation of models. Thus, the models that stand at the end of *Negative Dialectics*, 'are to make plain what negative dialectics is and to bring it into the realm of reality, in line with its own concept.'<sup>54</sup> Models are the products of philosophizing according to Adorno: 'Philosophical thinking is the same as thinking in models; negative dialectics is an ensemble of analyses of

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<sup>51</sup> 'Language offers no mere system of signs for cognitive functions. Where it appears essentially as a language, where it becomes a form of presentation [*Darstellung*], it will not define its concepts. It lends objectivity to them by the relation into which it puts the concepts centred about a thing. Language thus serves the intention of the concept to express completely what it means.'

Ibid. p.164/ Translation p.162.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid. p.10/Translation p.xx.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. p.39/Translation p.29.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. p.10/Translation p.xx.

models. [*negative Dialektik [ist] ein Ensemble von Modellanalysen*].<sup>55</sup> In order to appreciate the concept of model in Adorno it is necessary to appreciate that it is an attempt to appropriate Benjamin's concept of the idea. This is made evident by their common constellatory form.<sup>56</sup>

### *Ideas*

Adorno's assumption of constellatory presentation is derived from Benjamin, who introduced it to describe the presentation of ideas in relation to objects: 'Ideas are to objects as constellations are to stars.'<sup>57</sup> Constellation is therefore an analogy which attempts to draw attention to the disjunctive relation of objects to ideas. They refer to the form in which ideas provide a representation of truth, as opposed to the representation of knowledge. But: 'ideas are not represented in themselves, but solely and exclusively through an arrangement of concrete elements in the concept: as the configuration of these elements.'<sup>58</sup> Concepts are configured such that the unity that constitutes the order of knowledge – the rules of the

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid. p.39/Translation p.29. Adorno's appears to mimic Marx's phrase from the theses on Feuerbach: 'In its reality [human essence] is the ensemble of social relations.' In the light of Balibar's discussion of Marx's recourse to the French word 'ensemble' in the *Theses on Feuerbach*, Adorno's own use of this word in this notably emphatic articulation of negative dialectics takes on a resonance which draws parallels between the non-essentialist interests of both Balibar and Adorno. Commenting on Marx's sentence, Balibar speculates that Marx used the foreign word 'ensemble' to avoid using the German word '*Das Ganze*', the whole or totality, in order to stress that his concept of essence is purely constituted through its relations, without any appeal to a super-concept. (See Etienne Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx*, trans. C.Turner (Verso, London, New York, 1995) p.30.) This directly corresponds to Adorno's interests and may serve as an explanation of his own use of the term 'ensemble' here as a synonym for constellation.

<sup>56</sup> The extent to which Adorno introduces 'model' as a more scientifically respectable term for the constellatory form of ideas is evident in his early essay, 'The Actuality of Philosophy', e.g. p.131.

<sup>57</sup> Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p.34.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid. p.34.



appearance of objects – is transformed into the unity of truth. This introduces a strict division between the properly philosophical problem of the presentation of truth through the configuration of concepts into ideas, and the properly scientific problem of the presentation of knowledge through concepts of objects. The configuration of concepts in the presentation of ideas transforms the knowledge of objects into a presentation of truth, in which the absolute or infinite order of their being is revealed.<sup>59</sup> Just as constellations reveal an order that is not immediately present in the individual stars, and therefore immediately reducible to the individual stars, but which, nonetheless, presents the total context in which these stars stand; analogously, ideas present the relations of truth in which objects stand, that is not immediately present in their appearance. The analogy of constellations therefore attempts to characterise the order of ideas as an order of truth in the quasi-Platonic sense of a timeless order of forms essentially irreducible to their appearances within the world: ‘The idea belongs to a fundamentally different world from that which it apprehends [i.e. phenomena].’<sup>60</sup> Since the order of truth does not appear directly through the appearance of objects, which is subject to the finite conditions of experience, it cannot be judged relative to this order of conditions. ‘The question of whether [the idea] comprehends that which it apprehends, in the way in which the concept genus includes the species, cannot be regarded as a criterion of its existence.’<sup>61</sup> As the objective order to which, finally, objects are subject, the presentation of

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<sup>59</sup> ‘Phenomena do not, however, enter into the realm of ideas whole, in their crude empirical state, adulterated by appearances, but only in their basic elements, redeemed. They are divested of their false unity so that, thus divided, they might partake of the genuine unity of truth. It is their division, phenomena are subordinate to concepts, for it is the latter which effect the resolution of objects into their constituent elements. Conceptual distinctions are above all suspicion of sophistry only when their purpose is the salvation of phenomena in ideas....Through their mediating role concepts enable phenomena to participate in the existence of ideas.’ Ibid. p.33.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid. p.34.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid. p.34.

ideas is preoccupied with extremes through which the absolute conditions of objects are indicated, rather than merely the average conditions of the coherence experience of the appearance of objects.<sup>62</sup> Ideas are not subject to the coherence of subjective experience; subjective experience is ultimately subject to ideas. Ideas are 'simply given to be reflected upon',<sup>63</sup> as 'pre-existent' and 'timeless': 'Ideas are timeless constellations...'<sup>64</sup> As such, the representation of ideas concerns concepts that concern the extremes of experience, where the conditions of experience are exposed to an absolute order that constitutes them as such and transcends them as such.<sup>65</sup>

Ideas have the linguistic form of the sacred name or word, according to Benjamin, insofar as they do not merely intend to present the coherence of an experience, but to present what something is. The task of philosophy is to renew these words through revealing their presentation of truth, their truth-content.<sup>66</sup> Philosophy has the task of recovering the symbolic dimension of the word or name that is obscured by its subjection to the conditions of finite

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<sup>62</sup> 'The distinction between truth and the coherence provided by knowledge thus defines the idea as essence. Such is the implication of the theory of ideas for the concept of truth. As essences, truth and idea acquire that supreme metaphysical significance expressly attributed to them in the Platonic system.' Ibid. p.30

<sup>63</sup> Ibid. p.30.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid. p.34.

<sup>65</sup> 'Ideas are timeless constellations, and by virtue of the elements's being seen as points in such constellations, phenomena are subdivided and at the same time redeemed; so that those elements which it is the function of the concept to elicit from phenomena are most clearly evident at the extremes. The idea is best understood as the representation of the context within which the unique and extreme stands alongside its counterpart.' Ibid. pp.34-5.

<sup>66</sup> 'Adam's action of naming things is so far removed from play or caprice that it actually confirms the state of paradise as a state in which there is as yet no need to struggle with the communicative significance of words. Ideas are displayed, without intention, in the act of naming, and they have to be renewed in philosophical contemplation.' Ibid. p.37.



experience.<sup>67</sup> Benjamin's analysis of analogy in the German Baroque mourning play, can therefore be understood as a specifically philosophical task, in which analogies are understood as the secular, profane or finite historical experience of the symbolic claim to transcendence. Benjamin's philosophizing is therefore committed to the renewal of the presentation of truth through the renewal of this symbolic dimension from its dissolution into the conditions of coherent secular experience. This reveals its deep affinity with Kant's concept of philosophizing.<sup>68</sup>

Adorno's assumption of Benjamin's constellatory form of presentation is fundamental, but also critical. And as such, it reveals considerable ambiguity. Explicitly, it takes place through a professedly Hegelian critique, in which Benjamin's presentation of ideas through the name or word is subjected to criticism or determinate negation. Referring to a letter in which Benjamin professes that his *Arcades Project* was only presentable in a form that was an "'impermissible, 'poetic' one'", Adorno writes:

Benjamin's defeatism about his own thought was conditioned by the undialectical positivity of which he carried a formally unchanged remnant from his theological phase to his materialistic phase. By comparison, Hegel's equating negativity with the thought that keeps philosophy from both the positivity of science and the contingency of dilettantism has experiential substance. Thought as such, before all particular contents, is an act of negation, of resistance to that which is forced upon it; this is

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<sup>67</sup> 'The idea is something linguistic, it is that element of the symbolic in the essence of the word. In empirical perception, in which words have become fragmented, they possess, in addition to their more or less hidden, symbolic aspect, an obvious profane meaning. It is the task of the philosopher to restore, by representation the primacy of the symbolic character of the word, in which the idea is given self-consciousness...' Ibid. p.36.

<sup>68</sup> See sub-section '*World-concept of philosophizing*', in chapter 3, above.

what thought has inherited from its archetype, the relation between labour and material.<sup>69</sup>

This negative dimension reveals a relation to the absolute that is suppressed by the insistence on the given, pre-existent and timeless character of the name or word as the form of the idea. It is as a consequence of this that Adorno criticises Benjamin's presentation of his *Arcades Project* in 'The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire':

the theological motif of calling things by their names tends to turn into a wide-eyed presentation of mere facts. If one wished to put it in very drastically, one could say that your study is located at the crossroads of magic and positivism. That spot is bewitched. Only theory could break the spell – your own resolute, salutary speculative theory.<sup>70</sup>

The oscillation between magic and positivism is understood as a failure to dialectically mediate fact and concept and therefore to reveal the total social process through the theorisation of its facts. However, as Adorno makes clear this criticism is dedicated to Benjamin's own 'speculative theory', and not Hegel's. This is decisive. As has already been indicated, Benjamin's concept of the presentation of ideas by no means attempts to present them immediately through empirical concepts or facts. It intends neither positivism or magic in the sense that Adorno criticises. The task of philosophizing that Benjamin identifies in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, does not seek to present ideas through naming, but to understand the problem of philosophical presentation as a renewal of naming through configuration: as Benjamin, himself, makes clear in his response to Adorno's letter:

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<sup>69</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialektik* pp.29-30/ Translation p.19.

<sup>70</sup> Adorno's letter to Benjamin of 10 November 1938, in Adorno et al, *Aesthetics and Politics*, pp.129-30.



I believe that speculation can start its necessary bold flight with some prospect of success only if, instead of putting on the waxen wings of the esoteric, it seeks its source of strength in construction alone. It is because of the needs of construction that the second part of my book consists primarily of philological material.<sup>71</sup>

Adorno's criticism of Benjamin is therefore a dispute over the presentational form of certain of Benjamin's works, not with Benjamin's idea of speculative philosophy itself, which Adorno is fundamentally indebted to. Nonetheless, problems of presentation are fundamental to philosophy for both Adorno and Benjamin and there is a deeper sense in which it indicates a more profound divergence between them can be discerned. This involves the extent to which the given, pre-existent and timeless aspect of ideas infuses 'the crossroads of magic and positivism' that Adorno diagnoses. It is misleading to understand this divergence simply as a move from a theological to a materialistic phase. As Adorno makes clear, the problem of Benjamin's presentation is due to an 'undialectical positivity' that is common to both his theological and materialist phases. Adorno's criticism of Benjamin can therefore only be understood through appreciating his commitment to the dialectics that is common to these phases.<sup>72</sup> It therefore revolves around a point of indifference he diagnoses between Benjamin's theological and materialist phases. This can be understood through the relation of symbol and allegory.

The 'Epistemo-critical Prologue' commits Benjamin to a philosophizing that attempts to redeem the symbolic character of the idea from its dissolution into a finite, secular history;

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid. p.136.

<sup>72</sup> The late Benjamin also, of course, did not relinquish the theological dimension of his thinking in any straightforward manner: 'My thinking is related to theology as blotting paper is related to ink. It is saturated with it. Were one to go by the blotter, however, nothing of what is written would remain.' (Convolute N 7a,7) Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* trans. H.Eiland and K.McLaughlin (Belknap Press, Cambridge Ma., London, 1999), p.471.

a process that he discerns in the allegorising of transcendent symbols in German baroque poetry. Benjamin's philosophizing, like Kant's therefore, has the task of recovering the ideal, or symbolic dimension of language through the interpretation of its historico-linguistic instantiation in allegories:

The idea is something linguistic, it is that element of the symbolic in the essence of the word. In empirical perception, in which words have become fragmented, they possess, in addition to their more or less hidden, symbolic aspect, an obvious profane meaning. It is the task of the philosopher to restore, by representation, the primacy of the symbolic character of the word, in which the idea is given self-consciousness...<sup>73</sup>

Benjamin's distinction of allegory and symbol effectively reproduces the distinction between concepts of phenomena and ideas. Appreciating this clarifies its significance for Adorno's philosophizing. This emerges from the expressive or mimetic relation that allegories establish between their concept or idea and their form; in contrast to symbols, in which the mimetic quality of the sign is a direct obstacle to its symbolic capacity, tying it down to the content of a form that is incidental to its meaning. Allegories present ideas through images in which meaning and form are deeply entwined in an expressive or mimetic relation. Allegories therefore involve an insistence on the particularity of their expression that is absent from the symbol.

The correspondence of Benjamin's account of the relation of symbol to allegory, to Adorno's account of the relation of model to concept, deepens the recognition that Adorno's critique of Benjamin emerges immanently from his commitment to Benjamin's philosophizing. Philosophical or dialectical concepts are, for Adorno, allegorical in the sense emphasised by Benjamin. They do not function like symbols, through signification regardless

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<sup>73</sup> Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p.36. See discussion of Kant's philosophizing in section 'World-concept of philosophy' in chapter 3, above.



of their form. Rather, like allegories, dialectical concepts are for Adorno bound to the experience of the non-identical, of what they attempt to conceptualise through the particularity of their form, their linguistic medium. The expressive power they have is generated through their limitation to this form. Their inadequacy makes them combine into configurations or constellations through which they can make good on their insufficiency. Adorno's critique of the positivity of Benjamin's concepts – of the name-like quality of ideas – does not abandon Benjamin's philosophizing. It retains the hope of the name through denying it.<sup>74</sup> Adorno's philosophizing generates ideas – models – through the presentation of concepts alone. Their 'symbolic' dimension only emerges through the concretion of the configuration or constellation of concepts. It is this dispute over the need to philosophize through dialectical concepts that Adorno both recognises in Benjamin's constellatory principle of presentation, and criticises in his appeal to forms of language which suppress their conceptual – and in this sense, negative or dialectical – character. Adorno does not attempt to present ideas otherwise than through concepts, which have a strictly negative relation to the presentation of ideas: 'Benjamin's concepts still tend to an authoritarian concealment of their conceptuality. Concepts alone can achieve what the concept prevents.'<sup>75</sup> But, crucially, this does not abandon the central problem of Benjamin's philosophizing: the presentation of ideas as a presentation of truth not available to conceptual knowledge. It only insists more intently that ideas are only presentable through their finite elements and not immediately.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> 'The determinable flaw in every concept makes it necessary to cite others; this is the font of the only constellations which inherited something of the hope of the name. The language of philosophy approaches that name by denying it.' Adorno, *Negative Dialektik* p.62/ Translation p.53.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid. p.62/Translation p.53.

<sup>76</sup> See chapters 5 and 6 for further consideration of Adorno's relation to Benjamin's speculative philosophy.

### *Constellation versus sublation*

Constellations present an alternative form of identity to the progressive unfolding of the speculative concept developed by Hegel's concept of sublation; without thereby resorting to a merely abstract cover concept. According to Hegel, sublation should be understood in the twofold sense of to preserve and to dissolve.<sup>77</sup> This is fundamental to his speculative logic whereby the erroneous or negative aspect of a concept's relation to the non-conceptual reveals a determinacy that, once recognised, corrects the initial error of the concept, negating its negativity, and enabling a positive identity between concept and conceptualised. Adorno's negative dialectics is premised on the critique of the idealism of this positivisation of determinate negation. Gillian Rose has described Adorno's critique of Hegelian speculation as leading from Hegel's speculative propositions to chiasmic propositions, in which the horizon of reconciliation is blocked by scepticism.<sup>78</sup> But, if Adorno does not propose a speculative sublation of determinate negation, nor does he propose scepticism.<sup>79</sup> The chiasmic dimension of his language is necessary for the disjunctive experience of negativity that is

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<sup>77</sup> "To sublate" has a twofold meaning in language: on the one hand it means to preserve, to maintain [*aufbewahren, erhalten*], and equally it also means to cause to cease, to put an end to [*aufhören lassen, ein Ende machen*]. Even 'to preserve' includes a negative element, namely, that something is removed from its immediacy and so from an existence which is open to external influences, in order to preserve it. Thus what is sublated is at the same time preserved; it has only lost its immediacy but is not on that account annihilated...Something is sublated only insofar as it has entered into unity with its opposite; in this more particular signification as something reflected, it may fittingly be called a moment.' Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik*, Bd.1, p.114; trans. A.V.Miller, *Science of Logic*, p.107.

<sup>78</sup> 'In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer develop an account of domination which owes its credentials to a Nietzscheanism itself reduced from speculative to chiasmic propositions which elaborate the main thesis: 'myth is already enlightenment; and enlightenment reverts to mythology.' Gillian Rose, 'From- 'From Speculative to Dialectic Thinking - Hegel and Adorno', p.59.

<sup>79</sup> See chapter 5, below, for a deeper elaboration of Adorno's relation to Hegel's speculative logic.



essential to Adorno's speculative thought. This is saved from scepticism by an alternative form of unity to that provided by Hegelian speculation. Constellations provide this. They do not present a sublation of determinate negation, but a configuration of determinate negations. Simon Jarvis has suggested that these should be regarded, in distinction from Hegel's speculative propositions, as 'speculative differentiations', which negatively invoke a speculative experience of something beyond the choices that frame the present.<sup>80</sup>

Constellations do not relate to reconciliation progressively, as in Hegel. Constellations are not progressive, but combinatory: a non-progressive combination. That is to say, constellations combine concepts in order to illuminate the non-conceptual through a process of accumulation that aspires to increasing concretion, but which cannot claim that this process is progressive, insofar as it is not achieved through the negation of negation, but rather through a combination of negations. The configuration of concepts therefore does not present itself as a progressively sufficient identification of the object.<sup>81</sup> The model is one of affinity rather than identification; the generation of a likeness that resembles the object as a self-conscious illusion. This is its aesthetic or intuitive aspect. The configuration of concepts attempts to generate an image or intuition of the non-conceptual; not through the immediate intuition of the object in the concept, but through configuring the mimetic qualities submerged in its

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<sup>80</sup> 'Life without self-preservation, reconciliation without sacrifice, happiness without power: these as yet barely imaginable differentiations are no less speculatively thought by Adorno than is the identification of the real and rational by Hegel. These are Adorno's speculative differentiations to Hegel's speculative identifications. They are not propositions – they have no copula and no main verb – but are negatively articulated by constellations of propositions.' Simon Jarvis, *Adorno: A Critical Introduction*, p.230.

<sup>81</sup> 'The unifying moment survives without a negation of negation, but also without delivering itself to abstraction as a supreme principle. It survives because there is no step-by-step progression from the concepts to a more general cover concept. Instead, the concepts enter into a constellation.' Adorno, *Negative Dialektik* p.164/ Translation p.162.

linguistic medium in such a way that the non-conceptual is imaged negatively, revealing it as neither identical with the concept nor merely the negation of the negation of the concept. This reveals the essentially linguistic exertion of philosophical presentation.<sup>82</sup> Constellations therefore enable reconciliation through a dissolution of the principle of identity. They therefore invoke something other than the concepts or identifications out of which they are formed.

### Essay

Adorno identifies the essay as a privileged form of philosophizing.<sup>83</sup> It appears to be synonymous with the concept of model.<sup>84</sup> To describe it as a genre of thinking through models would tie it to the fate of a presupposed form and therefore precisely what the task of philosophizing must question over again in its practice.<sup>85</sup> It is better understood by analogy to Kant's concept of philosophizing: as a traditional image of philosophizing, which enables the renewal of philosophizing, not just the repetition of that image.<sup>86</sup> In its antipathy to fulfilling a prescribed role, the essay is a form of intellectual freedom for Adorno, linked with the

<sup>82</sup> '...to abolish language in thought is not to demythologise thought. Along with language, philosophy would blindly sacrifice whatever is not merely significative in dealing with its object; it is in language alone that like knows like. Yet we cannot ignore the perpetual denunciation of rhetoric by nominalists to whom the name bears no resemblance to what it says, nor can an unbroken rhetoric be summoned against them. Dialectics, literally language as the organon of thought, would mean to attempt a critical rescue of the rhetorical element, a mutual approximation of thing and expression to the point where the difference fades.' Ibid. p.65/ Translation p.56.

<sup>83</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, 'The Essay as Form' (1958) trans. S.W. Nicholson *Notes to Literature* vol.1. (Columbia University Press, New York, 1991) pp.3-23.

<sup>84</sup> 'Both thought and history come into communication within the models. Regarding efforts to achieve a form for such communication, I gladly put up with the reproach of essayism.' Adorno, 'The Actuality of Philosophy', p.132.

<sup>85</sup> See Adorno's critique of the genre in 'Universal and Particular', *Aesthetic Theory*, pp.199-224.

<sup>86</sup> See 'World-concept of philosophizing' in chapter 3, above.



emergence and fate of the Enlightenment.<sup>87</sup> This generates its critical relation to the intellectual division of labour. Adorno describes it as a form that does not correspond to the division between science and art. It does not immediately reconcile this division, which Adorno considers a utopian or regressive project. It is a hybrid form in which the fetishised division of science and art is brought to critical self-reflection. Corresponding to his principle morphological objection to system as a closed and self-sufficient or autonomous form, Adorno's concept of the essay is as an incomplete form, that is both open and free in the sense that it is neither prescribed nor prescriptive in its constitution. The essay involves the articulation of a relation of elements that is binding, but without being exhaustive or exclusive. Its insubstantiality, as a contingent, mortgaged and experimental form, inherently abandons the deductive or inductive completion of system as a principle of identity. It does not attempt to establish first principles or origins or exhaustive ends. It thereby remains true to the non-identity of the concepts it combines and the objects it refers to: 'Because the unbroken order of concepts is not equivalent to what exists, the essay does not aim at a closed deductive or inductive structure.'<sup>88</sup> The essay articulates received elements in their emergence and develops them as such without seeking to ground or foreclose them completely, in such a way that would arrest their emergence, their involvement in a process

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<sup>87</sup> 'In Germany the essay arouses resistance because it evokes intellectual freedom. Since the failure of the Enlightenment that has been lukewarm since Leibniz, even under present-day conditions of formal freedom, that intellectual freedom has never quite developed but has always been ready to proclaim its subordination to external authorities as its real concern. The essay, however, does not let its domain be prescribed for it.' Ibid. pp.3-4.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid. p.10. This anti-systemic critique is extended to the implicitly systemic aspects of empiricism: 'Even empiricist theories, which give priority to experience that is open-ended and cannot be anticipated, as opposed to fixed conceptual ordering, remain systematic in that they deal with preconditions for knowledge that are conceived as more or less constant and develop them as homogeneous a context as possible.' Ibid., p.9.

of becoming. The essay hereby manifests the processual transformation of traditional philosophy's concept of truth. Adorno's reception of this concept of truth from Hegel is developed into an immanent critique of Hegel's retention of the form of system. The essay proves itself to be a more radically processual form, uncircumscribed by claims to origin or end. This determines its relation to totality. The essay's immanent critique of Hegel extends to rejecting the positing of totality and presents Adorno's attempt to develop a dialectical logic in which the speculative appeal to totality would remain negative: 'The essay has to cause the totality to be illuminated in a partial feature, whether the feature be chosen or merely happened upon, without asserting the presence of the totality.'<sup>89</sup> The essay has the paradoxical form of a totality that is not a total: '[The essay's] totality, the unity of a form developed immanently, is that of something not total, a totality that does not maintain as form the thesis of the identity of thought and its object that it rejects as content.'<sup>90</sup> The essay's ambivalent presentation of totality differentiates it from the form of the 'masterpiece' or other forms of totalised creation.<sup>91</sup> The essay's immanent critique of Hegel extends to the contradictory relation of dialectics to its methodology; a criticism Adorno makes self-critically insofar as he is discussing the methodology of the essay:

Idealist philosophy, to be sure, suffered from the inconsistency of criticizing an abstract overarching concept, a mere 'result', in the name of process, which is inherently discontinuous, while at the same time talking about dialectical method in the manner of idealism. For this reason the essay is more dialectical than the dialectic is when the latter discourses on itself. The essay takes Hegelian logic at its word: the truth of the totality cannot be played off against individual judgements. Nor can truth

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid. p.16.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid. p.17.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid. p.17.



be made finite in the form of an individual judgement; instead, singularity's claim to truth is taken literally, up to the point where its untruth becomes evident.<sup>92</sup>

Consistent with the abandonment of rationalist deduction, Adorno makes clear that the essay rejects definition of its concepts. To compensate, it relies on the determinateness of its 'presentation' [*Darstellung*]. The meaning of concepts is not established once and for all, but relative to the process by which they are arranged; a process that does not just indicate, but composes something of the historical process through which its meaning is established. Because it cannot rely on the clarity of its definitions for precision, it is forced to compensate by the precision of its presentation of its elements, its choice and arrangement of concepts. This accounts for the necessary density of the essay form, which is so evident in Adorno's own essays. This emphasis on presentation generates a quality of closedness immanent to its openness, which produces an alternative to the closed form of system:

The essay is both more open and more closed than traditional thought would like. It is more open in that its structure negates system, and it satisfies its inherent requirements better the more rigorously it holds to that negation.... But the essay is also more closed, because it works emphatically at the form of its presentation. Consciousness of the non-identity of presentation and subject matter forces presentation to unremitting efforts.<sup>93</sup>

This is the particular exertion of presentation that Adorno saw, following Benjamin, as the fate of a philosophy without grounds.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid. p.19.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid. pp.17-8.

<sup>94</sup> Peter Osborne has remarked of the difficult passages in Benjamin's 'Goethe's Elective Affinities': 'It is necessary to traverse these passages again and again, not because they are grammatically obscure, but because they possess the exact measure of semantic opacity required to stimulate philosophical thought. It is precisely these kind of passages which contemporary intellectual culture

### *Fragments*

It is notable that Adorno's critique of system appeals very explicitly to a concept of the fragment.<sup>95</sup> Adorno produces very few reflections on the historical derivation of the form of the fragment, and despite his debt to Benjamin, rarely discusses its specificity to German Romanticism. But, regardless of biographical influence, Adorno's critique of system in many respects reproduces the Romantic's formation of the fragment. This inheritance is made explicit through the essay. If the fragment is the primary form of Romanticism, as Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy have argued, it is nonetheless derived explicitly from the various genres developed by the French and English moralists – such as Montaigne, Chamfort and Shaftesbury – amongst which the essay is central. We can therefore diagnose Adorno's understanding of the fragment through his understanding of the essay.<sup>96</sup>

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edits out of public discourse as impenetrable diversions.' 'Philosophizing Beyond Philosophy: Walter Benjamin Reviewed' *Radical Philosophy* no.88 (March/April, 1998), p.34.

<sup>95</sup> 'The categories of a critique of systems are at the same time the categories in which the particular is understood. What has once legitimately transcended particularity in the system has its place outside the system. The interpretative eye which sees more in a phenomenon than it is – and solely because of what it is – secularises metaphysics. Only fragments as the form of philosophy would give their proper place to the monads, those illusory idealistic drafts. They would be conceptions in the particular of the totality that is inconceivable as such.'

Adorno, *Negative Dialektik* pp.39-40. Translation (altered) p.28.

<sup>96</sup> Indeed, one of Adorno's rare references to the Romantic derivation of the fragment is introduced as part of the elaboration of the essay: 'If the essay opposes, aesthetically, the mean-spirited method whose sole concern is not to leave anything out, it is following an epistemological impulse. The romantic conception of the fragment as a construction that is not complete but rather progresses onward into the infinite through self-reflection champions this anti-idealist motive in the midst of Idealism. Even in the manner of its presentation, the essay may not act as though it had deduced its object and there was nothing left to say about it. Its self-relativization is inherent in its form: it has to be constructed as though it could always break off at any point. It thinks in fragments, just as reality is fragmentary, and finds its unity in and through the breaks and not by glossing over them.'



The originality of the Romantic fragment is achieved through its emphasis on the essential incompleteness of the forms that it inherited, and the insistence on this incompleteness as the condition for the presentation of the absolute. Each fragment presents the absolute, but incompletely. The fragments are therefore not just parts or sections, in which the totality is presented in exclusive particles, like the discreet pieces of a jigsaw. The absolute is presented in each fragment, but incompletely. This incompleteness therefore requires and projects further supplementation. This takes place, not through a super-concept or the addition of that missing piece of the fragment, but through further fragments. The absolute is therefore presented through a combination of fragments, each relating to every other through its essentially incomplete presentation of the essence, the absolute.<sup>97</sup> The system that this combination of fragments generates is therefore an infinite process of reflection. Each fragment reflects each other, generating a systematic inter-relation of reflections as a consequence of the incompleteness which binds them together. The abbreviated length of the fragment does not therefore distinguish it completely from the extended length of the essay. The essay's extended length can be <sup>seen as</sup> an extension of the process of reflection, just as Friedrich Schlegel presented only 'fragments', in the plural, <sup>This indicates</sup> not only <sup>essays or texts.</sup> <sup>the internal relations of the essay, but also its relations to other</sup> This is Adorno's understanding:

The essay has to cause the totality to be illuminated in a partial feature, whether the feature be chosen or merely happened upon, without asserting the presence of the totality. It corrects what is contingent and isolated in its insights in that they multiply,

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Adorno, 'The Essay as Form', p.16.

<sup>97</sup> As Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy put it: 'Fragmentary totality...cannot be situated in any single point: it is simultaneously in the whole and in each part. Each fragment itself is its completed individuality. It is thus identically the plural totality of fragments, which does not make up the whole (in, say, a mathematical mode) but replicates the whole, the fragmentary itself, in each fragment.' *The Literary Absolute*, p.44.

confirm, and disqualify themselves, whether in the further course of the essay itself or in the mosaic-like relationship to other essays, but not by a process of abstraction that ends in characteristic features derived from them.<sup>98</sup>

Insofar as each fragment presents the absolute, but incompletely, the essential law of their inter-relation is that each is equally close to the centre. Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy have argued that, 'the formula employed by Friedrich Schlegel for the *Ideas* may be applied to all the Fragments: each one 'indicates [*deuten*] the centre' (*Ideas* 155).<sup>99</sup> This is Adorno's own principle of composition declared for his late work *Aesthetic Theory*:

From my theorem that there is no philosophical first principle, it now also results that one cannot build an argumentative structure that follows the usual progressive succession of steps, but rather that one must assemble the whole out of a series of partial complexes that are, so to speak, of equal weight and concentrically arranged all on the same level; their constellation, not their succession, must yield the idea.<sup>100</sup>

The essential incompleteness of fragments departs from the dogmatic form of the system as a hierarchically structured form. More radically, it departs from the principle of self-sufficiency and completeness that is still, albeit problematically, retained by Kant's organic concept of system and redeemed emphatically by Hegel. This establishes the fundamental significance of the fragment as a form of Adorno's philosophizing. It also provides a prototype for the peculiarly ambivalent attitude Adorno indicates towards the concept of system. The Romantics retain the ideal of the system as the form of presentation, but structure it through the essentially processual, open and non-self-sufficient – that is,

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<sup>98</sup> Adorno, 'Essay as Form', pp.16-7.

<sup>99</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, *The Literary Absolute*, p.44.

<sup>100</sup> From the 'Editor's Afterword' to Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p.364.



fragmentary – apprehension of the absolute. This dissolves the reduction of the absolute to the pre-established form of the system. Rather than apprehending the absolute in terms of a system, the system is apprehended in terms of the absolute. As Benjamin notably pointed out: ‘Rather than attempting to grasp the absolute systematically, however, [Friedrich Schlegel] sought conversely to grasp the system absolutely.’<sup>101</sup> The Romantics therefore extend Kant’s critique of dogmatism to the critique of the concept of system itself, as a discourse on method, thereby finally breaking with Descartes.<sup>102</sup> It is in this respect that Adorno’s concept of the essay inherits the Romantics most explicitly. ‘The Essay as Form’ includes an itemised rejection of *The Discourse on Method*.<sup>103</sup> Dogmatism’s task of definition becomes fragmentary. The definition is displaced by the fragment.

### **A new *Dictionnaire philosophique***

In *Negative Dialectics* Adorno cites Jean Le Rond D’Alembert’s distinction between ‘*esprit de système*’ and ‘*esprit systématique*’ in an attempt to articulate his critique of system. He sees D’Alembert’s proposal of *esprit systématique* as the method of the *Encyclopédie*, as anticipating the critique of system he is proposing; one which leads from the system to ‘the open realm of definition by individual moments’.<sup>104</sup> This rather obscure, uncited reference is

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<sup>101</sup> Walter Benjamin, ‘The Concept of Art-Critique in German Romanticism’, in his *Selected Writings*, vol.1, p.138.

<sup>102</sup> René Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy* trans. D.A.Cress (Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis, Cambridge, 1993).

<sup>103</sup> ‘The essay gently challenges the ideal of *clara et distincta perceptio* and indubitable certainty. Altogether, [the essay] might be interpreted as a protest against the four rules established by Descartes’s *Discourse on Method* at the beginning of modern Western science and its theory.’ Adorno, ‘Essay as Form’, p.14.

<sup>104</sup> ‘Speaking for the *esprit systématique* is not only the trivial motive of a cohesion that will tend to crystallize in the incoherent anyway; it does not only satisfy the bureaucrats’ desire to stuff all things

to D'Alembert's *Preliminary Discourse to the Encyclopaedia of Diderot*.<sup>105</sup> It deserves further elaboration, since it reveals a resonant, if largely subterranean, heritage to Adorno's concept of philosophical form, including, notably the Romantic current within this thought.

D'Alembert's distinction between *esprit de système* and *esprit systématique* is textually obscure, especially when thought in terms of Adorno's appropriation. It is produced as a critique of axiomatic definition, derived ostensibly from Descartes *Discourse on Method*, but in a form that is distinct from that proposed by Adorno. D'Alembert's concern is with the establishment of principles that will enable the most simple or reduced expression of the unity of the objects of science. However – and here is where Adorno's interest can be detected – D'Alembert's concern is to emphasise the need for these principles to enable the greatest richness in their application. He finds this, ironically perhaps, in the very reduction of the principles: 'the more one reduces the number of principles of a science the more one gives them scope, and since the object of a science is necessarily fixed, the principles applied to that object will be so much more fertile as they are fewer in number.'<sup>106</sup> D'Alembert's distinction emphasises the openness and richness that is enabled by this 'systematic spirit' – something he emphasises by referring to the 'true' systematic spirit – as opposed to a reification of the system as a closed and constrictive apprehension of objects, the 'spirit of the system'. Thus, rather than the system (of principles) being the spirit, the spirit is to be

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into their categories. The form of the system is adequate to the world, whose substance eludes the hegemony of the human thought; but unity and unanimity are at the same time an oblique projection of pacified, no longer antagonistic conditions upon the coordinates of supremacist, oppressive thinking. The double meaning of philosophical systematics leaves no choice but to transpose the power of thought, once delivered from the systems, into the open realm of definition by individual moments.' Adorno, *Negative Dialektik* p.35/ Translation, pp.24-5.

<sup>105</sup> Jean Le Rond D'Alembert's *Preliminary Discourse to the Encyclopaedia of Diderot* (1751) trans. Richard N. Swab and Walter E. Rex (The Bobbs Merrill Company, 1963). See in particular pp.22-3.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid. p.22.



approached through them, systematically. This corresponds to Adorno's preoccupation with  
*Encyclopaedic*  
 & thinking: 'Encyclopaedic thinking [*Denken als Enzyklopädie*] – rationally organised and yet  
 discontinuous, unsystematic, loose – expressed the self-critical spirit of reason'; a thinking  
 that Adorno interprets, in the manner of Benjamin, as a ruin, falling from the destruction of  
 its original form within Enlightenment rationalism, and therefore revealed mournfully as a  
 new possibility released through this destruction.<sup>107</sup>

The significance of the project of the *Encyclopaedia* for Adorno's concept of  
 philosophical form has further significance. D'Alembert's articulation of the relation of  
 principles to their further elaboration grounds a distinction between philosophy and the  
 encyclopaedia itself. 'Philosophy' corresponds to 'the principal branches of that part of  
 human knowledge which consists either in the direct ideas which we have received through  
 our senses, or in the combination or comparison of these ideas'<sup>108</sup>; whereas 'the  
 encyclopaedia' consists of the infinite subdivision of these branches. This distinction grounds

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<sup>107</sup> In it worth quoting more broadly from this passage in order to clarify this interpretation:

...ultimately every theory that is brought to bear on the phenomena, should come to rest in the  
 phenomena. In that sense, too, philosophical theory means that its own end lies in its  
 realization. There is no lack of related intentions in history. The French Enlightenment got a  
 formally systematic touch from its supreme concept, that of reason; yet the constitutive  
 entanglement of its idea of reason with that of an objectively rational arrangement of society  
 deprived the idea of a pathos which it was not to recover until the realization of reason as an  
 idea was renounced, until it was absolutized into the spirit. Encyclopaedic thinking [*Denken  
 als Enzyklopädie*] – rationally organised and yet discontinuous, unsystematic, loose –  
 expressed the self-critical spirit of reason. That spirit represented something which later  
 departed from philosophy, due as much to its increasing distance from practical life as to its  
 absorption in the academic bustle: it represented mundane experience, that eye for reality of  
 which thought, too, is a part.

Adorno, *Negative Dialektik* pp.39-40/ Translation p.29.

<sup>108</sup> D'Alembert, *Preliminary Discourse*, p.36. This should perhaps be understood as the model for  
 Voltaire's *Dictionnaire philosophique* (1764) translated by T.Besterman as *Philosophical Dictionary*  
 (Penguin Books, London, New York, 1972).

two aims within the presentation of the Encyclopaedia: the encyclopaedia itself and, corresponding to its philosophical dimension, a 'Reasoned Dictionary'.<sup>109</sup> This distinction between the forms of the encyclopaedia and the dictionary, seems to provide the precursor to the form of the combination of philosophical texts that Adorno intended above and beyond the level of the particular text. As he writes in his 'Introduction' to *Catchwords*:

The title *Catchwords* alludes to the encyclopaedic form that, unsystematically, discontinuously, presents what the unity of experience crystallizes into a constellation. Thus the technique of a small volume with somewhat arbitrarily chosen catchwords perhaps might make conceivable a new *Dictionnaire philosophique*.<sup>110</sup>

Adorno's suggestion of a 'new *Dictionnaire philosophique*', appears to register the distinction that D'Alembert makes above, insofar as it concerns the presentation of principles, which allow of further encyclopaedic elaboration. This impression is deepened once we note both the correspondence between 'model' and 'idea' and the fact that *Catchwords* is one part of a 3 volume series entitled *Critical Models* [*Kritische Modelle*].<sup>111</sup> It therefore seems that

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<sup>109</sup> 'The work [i.e. the Encyclopaedia] whose first volume we are presenting today has two aims. As an *Encyclopaedia*, it is to set forth as well as possible the order and connection of the parts of human knowledge. As a *Reasoned Dictionary of the Sciences, Arts and Trades*, it is to contain the general principles that form the basis of each science and each art, liberal or mechanical, and the most essential facts that make up the body and substance of each.' Ibid. p.4.

<sup>110</sup> 'Catchwords' (1969) in *Critical Models*, p.126.

<sup>111</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Kritische Modelle*, Gesammelte Schriften Bd.10.2 (Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1977), translated by H.W.Pickford as *Critical Models*.

As Theodore Besterman remarks, with remarkable relevance, in the introduction to the translation of Voltaire's *Dictionnaire philosophique*:

The *Dictionnaire philosophique* is not what we now understand by a dictionary, least of all a dictionary of philosophy, for its alphabetical arrangement is little more than a literary *tromp l'oeil*. This epoch making little book is in fact a series of essays on a wide variety of subjects, sometimes arranged under convenient headings in alphabetical sequence, but sometimes placed under deliberately misleading or even provocative catchwords.



Adorno's understanding of the relationship of philosophy to empirical science, which has so perplexed commentators, may well be understood in terms of the relation of the *Dictionnaire philosophique* to the *Encyclopédie*; as the generation of a combination of models or ideas, which in a discontinuous, open-ended form, present the principles for the development and elaboration of further research. This correspondence has further resonance. Like the *Encyclopédie*, Adorno appears to have understood his work as part of a collective project, at least latently through the institutional projects of the Frankfurt School. The collective project of an 'interdisciplinary materialism', diagnosed in Horkheimer's early work, can therefore be interpreted as a constitutive consideration of this form of presenting philosophy in Adorno, even if relatively few of his writings are in fact co-authored. Furthermore, like the French Encyclopaedists, the Frankfurt School conducted their expansive intellectual programme – a theory of the social totality as a totality – as an explicitly and radically political programme.

#### *A dictionary of fragments*

Adorno's critical salvation of encyclopaedic thinking as a ruin generated through the destruction of the French Enlightenment, should perhaps be understood, not just in the form of its reception as a ruin, but, <sup>more</sup> substantively, as inflected by Romanticism. The connection between the Jena Romantics and the Encyclopaedists seems to have been direct, through the reception of Diderot's philology as exemplary of the fragmentary experience of Antiquity.<sup>112</sup> The Romantics also employed collective practices of writing as part of a simultaneously intellectual and political project. This comparison is also informative in its differences. The

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Voltaire, *Philosophical Dictionary*, p.5.

<sup>112</sup> 'The philological fragment, especially in the tradition of Diderot, takes on the value of a *ruin*. Ruin and fragment conjoin the functions of the monument and of evocation; what is thereby both remembered as lost and presented in a sort of sketch (or blueprint) is always the living unity of a great individuality, author, or work.' Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, *The Literary Absolute*, p.42.

Romantics sought to destroy the Cartesian model of method that is only tentatively modified by the Encyclopaedists. It seems the case therefore that Adorno's critical reception of encyclopaedic thinking stressed this Romantic inflection.

This impression is deepened once we think of the alternative that Adorno's intimation of an anti-systematic encyclopaedia presents to the systematic encyclopaedia of Hegel, his *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences*. This is not developed on the basis of a Cartesian concept of system, derived through axiomatic principles, but, following Kant and Romanticism, through a discursive, processual and organic concept of system developed through a self-correcting process of speculative reasoning. Hegel's understanding of the concept<sup>of</sup> encyclopaedia characterises it in relation to the concept of philosophy, but, in certain respects, inverts the relation proposed by D'Alembert. For Hegel, the encyclopaedia is understood as an introductory aid, which is 'restricted to the beginnings and fundamental concepts of the particular sciences',<sup>113</sup> and is incomplete and therefore inferior to the fully elaborated philosophy. However, Hegel also makes a notable distinction between his 'philosophical encyclopaedia' and the 'ordinary encyclopaedia'. The ordinary encyclopaedia presents merely an aggregate of the sciences, as an arbitrary and externally imposed order; whereas the philosophical encyclopaedia presents the sciences as an essential unity, derived from the perspective that they finally present one, unified science.<sup>114</sup> It is notable that Hegel

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<sup>113</sup> Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic*, p.39.

<sup>114</sup> The passage in which this distinction is made reads as follows:

'As an *Encyclopaedia*, science is not presented in the detailed development of its particularization; instead, it has to be restricted to the beginnings and fundamental concepts of the particular sciences. [Zusätze] How much of each particular part is required to constitute a particular science is undetermined, insofar as the part must not be just an isolated moment, but in order to be something-true it must itself be a totality. The whole of philosophy genuinely forms *One* science; but it can also be considered as a whole made up of several particular sciences. – The philosophical encyclopaedia distinguishes itself from the other, ordinary encyclopaedia because the latter has to be some sort of



refers to each particular science within the philosophical encyclopaedia as systematically formed as a part that relates to a whole or totality through which it realises itself as a whole. Like the Romantic fragment, the particular science involves an apprehension of the absolute intensified within it. But, unlike the fragment, the process of realising this absolute is not interminable. Adorno does not aspire to a total philosophy, as Hegel did. He nonetheless seeks to renew the freedom of philosophizing from the constraints of the division of intellectual labour resulting from this. His philosophizing, from the level of the individual word to the organisation of larger combinations of texts, indicates a fragmentary form of presentation in which the absolute is apprehended negatively through the open-ended, discursive constellation of models or ideas. The axiomatic definition gives way to the fragment. Adorno's new *Dictionnaire philosophique* has a Romantic form. It is a Romantic dictionary in which each 'definition' is a fragment.

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*aggregate* of sciences, which are taken up contingently and empirically; and among them there are also some that are 'sciences' only in name, since they are themselves no more than a mere collection of bits of information. In the case of such an aggregate, since the sciences in it are taken up externally, the unity in which the sciences are brought together is itself an *external* unity – *an order*. For the same reason, as well as because the materials are of a contingent nature too, this order has to remain *tentative*. It must always display aspects that do not really fit in. The philosophical encyclopaedia excludes, first of all, mere aggregates of information, such as philology at first sight appears to be. Secondly, it also (just as decisively) excludes learning that is based on mere arbitrariness, such as heraldry, for instance. Sciences of this kind are *positive* through and through. Thirdly, there are other sciences that are called 'positive', too, in spite of the fact that they have a rational basis and beginning. Here the rational component belongs to philosophy; but the *positive side* is peculiar to each one of them.'

Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic*, pp.39-40.

## Chapter 5

### Speculation

Adorno's understanding of speculation and its decisive significance for the concept of philosophy, is formed through his dual criticism of positivism and idealism, specifically in terms of their concepts of science. According to Adorno, the dispute between positivism and idealism (specifically, Hegel) can be characterized as a dispute over the unity of science and speculation. Whereas for Hegel, speculation is an essential dimension of reason's self-corrective labour and therefore fundamental to the development of philosophy as a science, positivism rejects speculation from science as an illegitimate metaphysical residue of traditional philosophy. Adorno seizes on the significance of speculation for the development of a concept of philosophy independently from positivism and idealism. He rejects both these projects as failing to understand the contradiction which constitutes philosophy's relation to science – their simultaneous dependence and independence – and consequently identifies a fundamental homology between absolute idealism and positivism:

If...the relation of philosophy to science is antagonistic in itself – i.e. if as science it enters into opposition with its own *raison d'être*, and yet whenever it gives a cold shoulder to science literally loses its reason – then its attempt to regard itself as science must lead to contradiction. The Hegelian principle of dialectic, understood through the tension between speculation and science, is the positive expression of such negativity. Hegel seeks to recast it as the organon of truth. What all philosophy works at – philosophy which expects to be 'raised to the status of a science' with the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the conceptual movement which strives for lordship over contradictoriness by settling it – becomes equated with the essence of philosophy.



One more step and the metaphysician of absolute spirit, for whom the world is always right, could be called the consistent positivist.<sup>1</sup>

The development of the contradiction between philosophy and science in terms of the negative relation of speculation and the confirmation of what is the case, indicates a decisive aspect to Adorno's concept of philosophy. This negative concept of speculation is a misnomer for Hegel. It has in many respects more in common with Kant, who, despite pursuing the traditional identification of metaphysics and science that Adorno seeks to dissolve, nonetheless recognised a transgressive dimension of reasoning that could be incorporated into science only problematically; namely, a dialectic of illusion or semblance.

### **Dialectic of semblance**

Kant describes dialectic as a logic of semblance or illusion [*'eine Logik des Scheins'*].<sup>2</sup> This denomination and the division of transcendental logic into an analytical part and dialectical part results from Kant's rejection of the possibility of a 'sufficient and at the same time general criterion of truth....'<sup>3</sup>, since a general criterion will not be sufficient in the particular instance. All that it is possible to establish with certainty is a criterion of truth that is the 'mere form' of knowledge, 'leaving aside all content'.<sup>4</sup> It is therefore possible to establish a canon of the formal conditions of knowledge as 'a negative condition of all truth. But further than this logic cannot go. It has no touchstone for the discovery of such error as concerns not

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<sup>1</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Zur Metakritik der Erkenntnistheorie* (1956) GS Bd.5 (Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1970), p.51; trans. W.Domingo, *Against Epistemology* (Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1982), p.44.

<sup>2</sup> Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, p.A293/B349.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p.A59/B83.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p.A59/B83.

the form but the content.’<sup>5</sup> This canon constitutes the analytic part of transcendental logic. Dialectic is the attempt or, more precisely for Kant, the temptation to treat this canon as an organon for the production of truth; that is, the treatment of these formal criteria as sufficient for the establishment of objective truth. It therefore leads to the over-extension of these formal criteria, beyond what can be objectively established in terms of experience, and the generation of a semblance or illusion of objective knowledge when no such knowledge has in fact been established:

There is...something so tempting in the possession of an art so specious, through which we give to all our knowledge, however uninstructed we may be in regard to its content, the form of understanding, that general logic, which is merely a *canon* of judgement, has been employed as if it were an *organon* for the actual production of at least the semblance of objective assertions, and has thus been misapplied. General logic, when thus treated as an organon, is called *dialectic*.<sup>6</sup>

The temptation of dialectic is not, however, something that should be altogether avoided, according to Kant, since it is an inevitable and, to an extent, beneficial dimension of human reasoning. Insofar as this semblance is inevitable and beneficial, it is to be incorporated into transcendental logic, as transcendental semblance; and dialectic, as the logic of this semblance, is to be transformed into a transcendental dialectic, through which these semblances of reason are subjected to a critique that distinguishes their beneficial from their misleading dimensions. In short, dialectics becomes the critique of transcendental semblance.

This critique has the special task of dealing with the inevitable, unavoidable and even beneficial qualities of semblance within transcendental logic. As a logic of semblance, Kant therefore distinguishes transcendental dialectic from other treatments of semblance.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p.A59-60/B84.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p.A61-2/B85.



Dialectics is distinguished from the establishment of probability insofar as probability is not necessarily deceptive. It is not appearance insofar as appearance is neither true nor a semblance: 'For truth or illusion is not in the object, insofar as it is intuited, but in the judgement about it, insofar as it is thought. It is therefore correct to say that the senses do not err – not because they always judge rightly but because they do not judge at all.'<sup>7</sup> Kant also distinguishes it from empirical semblance, insofar as transcendental semblance concerns a deceptive extension of the understanding as if it did not need intuition; as opposed to empirical illusion which is due to being 'misled by the influence of imagination.'<sup>8</sup> Finally, Kant distinguishes transcendental semblance from formal logical semblance, insofar as logical semblance is due to the misapplication of a rule and is avoidable as such; whereas:

Transcendental illusion...does not cease even after it has been detected and its invalidity clearly revealed by transcendental criticism (e.g. the illusion in the proposition: the world must have a beginning in time). The cause of this is that there are fundamental rules and maxims for the employment of our reason (subjectively regarded as a faculty of human knowledge) and that these have all the appearance of being objective principles. We therefore take the subjective necessity of a connection of our concepts, which is to the advantage of the understanding, for an objective necessity in the determination of things in themselves.<sup>9</sup>

Consequently, transcendental semblance is a 'natural and unavoidable dialectic of pure reason', a '*natural and inevitable illusion*',<sup>10</sup> which the critique of transcendental illusion can expose and warn against, but not eradicate altogether.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p.A293/B350.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p.A295/B352.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p.A297/B353-4.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p.A298/B354.

Semblance is a natural property of reason according to Kant because of reason's nature as a faculty of principles, as opposed to the understanding as a faculty of rules, where principles involve a synthetic capacity to make inferences through a concept independently of an intuition for that inference. Kant understands this inferential capacity of reason to be legitimate insofar as it is employed in helping the understanding, which can substantiate itself, into unity with itself, insofar as the establishment of this unity is beyond what can be intuited. Because this unity of reason is transcendent to any appearances, its beneficial employment cannot be treated constitutively, that is, as if it were an object of experience. Rather, within the transcendental critique of illusion it must be considered as a maxim or a demand, related to the state of knowledge, but not immanent to it; not realizable within it. The ideas of reason – namely, those concepts which enable the unity of the understanding in analogy to the unity of sensibility through the 'categories' – must therefore be employed 'regulatively', that is, as if they were real, but without claiming that they are real. This unity of reason is established by analogy to the unity of sensibility through the categories of the understanding:

...although we are unable to find in *intuition* a schema for the complete systematic unity of all concepts of the understanding, an *analogon* of such a schema must necessarily allow of being given. This analogon is the idea of the *maximum* in the division and unification of the knowledge of the understanding under one principle. For what is greatest and absolutely complete can be determinately thought, all restricting conditions, which give rise to an indeterminate manifoldness, being left aside. Thus the idea of reason is an analogon of a schema of sensibility; but with this difference, that the application of the concepts of the understanding to the schema of



reason does not yield knowledge of the object itself...but only a rule or principle for the systematic unity of all employment of the understanding.<sup>11</sup>

Adorno's articulation of negative dialectics is deeply informed by Kant's dialectic of semblance. But this reception is also deeply informed by the critique of Kant's dialectics developed by Hegel and the concept of dialectics generated through this critique; a dialectics which seeks to overcome its regulative employment and re-establish its constitutive employment as an organon of absolute knowledge.

*From an organon of semblance to an organon of absolute knowledge*

In contrast to Kant's treatment of dialectic as a critique of the transgression of reason beyond its formal employment, Hegel regards the significance of dialectic to be the extension of thinking beyond the formalism and methodologism of Kant's transcendental logic, and the integration of the critique of cognition into the process of cognition itself:

Certainly, the forms of thinking should not be used without investigation; but this process of investigation is itself a process of cognition. So the activity of the forms of

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p.A665/B663. The deduction of the ideas of reason is therefore established as follows:

If then it can be shown that the three transcendental ideas (the psychological, the cosmological and the theological) although they do not directly relate to, or determine any object corresponding to them, nonetheless, as rules of the empirical employment of reason, lead us to systematic unity, under the presupposition of such an *object in the idea*; and that they thus contribute to the extension of empirical knowledge, without ever being in a position to run counter to it, we may conclude that it is a necessary maxim of reason to proceed always in accordance with such ideas. This, indeed, is the transcendental deduction of all ideas of speculative reason, not as *constitutive* principles...but as *regulative* principles of the systematic unity of the manifold of empirical knowledge in general, whereby this empirical knowledge is more adequately secured within its own limits and more effectively improved than would be possible, in the absence of such ideas, through the employment merely of the principles of the understanding.

Ibid. p.A671/B699.

thinking, and the critique of them, must be united within the process of cognition. The forms of thinking must be considered in and for themselves; they are the object and the activity of the object itself; they investigate themselves, [and] they must determine their own limits and point out their own defects. This is the same activity of thinking that will soon be taken into particular consideration under the name 'dialectic'...<sup>12</sup>

This rejection of formalism is tied to the rejection of perhaps its main cause, Kant's thesis of the unknowability of the 'thing-in-itself'. Hegel subverts the anti-subjectivist implications of this thesis and instead diagnoses its unknowability as a direct product of the abstractness of the subject of knowing which Kant's formalism produces:

The *thing-in-itself*...expresses the object, inasmuch as *abstraction* is made of all that it is for consciousness, of all determinations of feeling, as well as of all determinate thoughts about it. It is easy to see what is left, namely, what is *completely abstract*, or totally *empty*, and determined only as what is 'beyond'; the *negative* of representation, of feeling, of determinate thinking, etc. But it is just as simple to reflect that this *caput mortuum* is itself only *the product* of thinking, and precisely of the thinking that has gone to the extreme of pure abstraction, the product of the empty 'I' that makes its own empty *self-identity* into its *object*.<sup>13</sup>

Kant's limitation of logic to the transcendental form of true knowledge, in order to limit idealism and enable a greater sensitivity to content, is therefore accused of failing to do precisely that. In contrast, Hegel proposes to think what for Kant was unthinkable, and propose a more concrete logic precisely through a more emphatic idealism, an absolute idealism:

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<sup>12</sup> Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic*, p.82.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. p.87.



...the things of which we have immediate knowledge are mere appearances, not only *for us*, but also *in-themselves*, and that the proper determination of these things, which are in this sense 'finite', consists in having the ground of their being not within themselves but in the universal divine idea. This interpretation must also be called idealism, but, as distinct from the subjective idealism of the Critical Philosophy, it is *absolute idealism*.<sup>14</sup>

Hegel therefore rejects Kant's whole division of logic into an analytical and a dialectical part and the consequent reduction of dialectic to a critical employment. Instead, he generalises the employment of dialectic to the cognition of all objects, as that cognition of the contradictory determinations in which all actual objects are involved. Furthermore, this dialectical constitution of objects – their negative or contradictory constitution – is revealed to be part of a process of revealing the concrete unity of the object, its positivity:

...Kant stopped at the merely negative result (that how things are in themselves is unknowable), and did not penetrate to the cognition of the true and positive significance of the antinomies. This true and positive significance (expressed generally) is that everything actual contains opposed determinations within it, and in consequence the cognition and, more exactly, the comprehension of an object amounts precisely to our becoming conscious of it as a concrete unity of opposed determinations.<sup>15</sup>

It is notable that Hegel associates negativity with the essential quality of thinking, a quality that marks its superiority over the world and which finally he attributes to its divine provenance. It is Kant's limitation of this divine provenance as the starting point of his thinking that leads to the persistent negativity of his dialectic as a symptom of its limitation to

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid. pp.88-9.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. p.93.

finite presuppositions.<sup>16</sup> Hegel's reconfiguration of Kant's dialectic of semblance, as a crucial, but negative moment of thinking, elaborates a negative concept of dialectics which Adorno seeks to critically appropriate and in terms of which his concept of speculation needs to be understood and justified.

### **Dialectical and speculative thinking**

The construction of negative dialectics renders Adorno's claim to speculation highly problematic, at least when it is understood in its Hegelian form. From this perspective, Gillian Rose has diagnosed Adorno's dialectics as a mobilization of dialectical thinking *against* speculative thinking:

Adorno's...strategy of 'negative dialectic' is perfectly consistent with his confessed limitation of thinking to 'dialectic'. What needs developing, however, concerns the way in which the stress on the epithet 'negative' has detracted attention from the larger issue: that 'dialectical' thinking is not 'speculative' thinking.<sup>17</sup>

But Adorno was certainly not unconscious or indifferent to the tension negative dialectics generates for Hegel's speculative thinking. As he himself made clear, the irreducibly speculative quality of philosophy needs to be understood in a non-Hegelian form:

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<sup>16</sup> '...thinking the empirical world essentially means altering its empirical form, and transposing it into something-universal; so thinking exercises a *negative* activity with regard to that foundation as well: when the perceived material is determined by universality, it does *not remain* in its first, empirical shape....although being certainly does pertain to the world, it is only semblance, not genuine being, not absolute truth; for, on the contrary, the truth is beyond that appearance, in God alone, and only God is genuine being.' Ibid. p.96.

<sup>17</sup> Gillian Rose, 'From Speculative to Dialectical Thinking – Hegel and Adorno', *Judaism and Modernity: Philosophical Essays* (Blackwell, Cambridge Ma., Oxford, 1993) p.59.



Even after breaking with idealism, philosophy cannot do without speculation, which was exalted by idealism and tabooed with it – meaning speculation, of course, in a sense broader than the overly positive Hegelian one.<sup>18</sup>

Hegel's concept of speculation or speculative thinking is developed as a critique and alternative to forms of thinking which suppose an essential separation between the process of thinking and what is thought – that is, between concept and object, form and content, subject and predicate, and so on – whether that disjunction is due to an idealistic insistence on the concept or a materialistic insistence on the object. Speculative thinking recognizes the separateness of thinking and what is thought – the negativity of their relation – as moments of a process of mediation which unifies them. This produces a different relation to error to that encouraged by non-speculative thinking, where error, mismatch or contradiction is understood as disqualifying one or other part of the proposition; either the concept is deemed abstract or empty, or the object is deemed absent. Conversely, speculative thinking understands error or contradiction as revealing further determinations in the relation of concept and object, which, once recognised, enable the correction of that error. Speculative thinking is therefore a process of critical reflection in which the reflective relation of concept and object enables the criticism of their emptiness and their fixed opposition.

Adorno affirms Hegel's development of speculative thinking as a process of critical self-reflection and seeks to defend its legitimacy against positivist derogations of it as subjective caprice.<sup>19</sup> He also seeks to affirm two further consequences of Hegel's

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<sup>18</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, p.27/ Translation pp.15-6. Simon Jarvis rightly stressed this persistence of speculative thinking in Adorno's dialectics against its suppression by critics such as Rose. See Simon Jarvis, *Adorno: A Critical Introduction* (Polity Press, Cambridge, 1998), especially, pp.168-74 and pp.226-31.

<sup>19</sup> '...everyday linguistic usage converts the concept of the speculative into its opposite. It is no longer interpreted, as it was by Hegel, in the sense of the critical self-reflection of the intellect, of self-

development of speculative thinking for philosophy: the distinction of philosophy from method or a position externally opposing other positions.<sup>20</sup> Speculative thinking destroys the legitimacy of a logic that could be established independently of its application and therefore of any instrumental concept of philosophy as method or methodology. Hegel does not thereby abandon the development of philosophy as a method, indeed a 'speculative method'.<sup>21</sup>

However, this method is defined by its lack of externality to what it deals with: '...the [speculative] method is not an external form, but the soul and the Concept of the content.'<sup>22</sup>

Relatedly, speculative thinking destroys the understanding of philosophy in terms of competing positions. Their divergence is subjected to the same critique as the separation of moments with the process of thinking.<sup>23</sup> In respect of these qualities – as a process of critical self-reflection of thought, as anti-methodological and as refusing the competition of different positions – Adorno's idea of philosophy is deeply informed by Hegel's speculative thinking. Adorno's divergence from Hegel and his development of a non-Hegelian concept of speculation is generated by his critique of Hegel's claim that speculative thinking is the

reflection's boundedness and self-correction. But rather it is imperceptibly interpreted in a popular manner. Here, he who speculates is viewed as an unrestricted wild thinker who in his vanity dispenses with logical self-criticism and any confrontation with the facts.... What was once intended to signify the thought that renounces its own narrowness and in so doing gains objectivity, is now equated with subjective caprice.'

Theodor W. Adorno, 'Introduction', trans. G.Adey and D.Frisby, in Adorno et al, *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology* (Heinemann, London, 1976), p.5.

The pathos of Adorno's defence should be qualified by Hegel's recognition of this popular meaning of speculation at the time. See Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic*, p.132.

<sup>20</sup> See chapter 2 and section 'Not *Weltanschauung*' in chapter 3, above.

<sup>21</sup> Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic*, p.304.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. p.307.

<sup>23</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p.2. This is elaborated far more extensively in Hegel's writings on the history of philosophy. See in particular 'The Difference between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy' and 'Introduction' to *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*.



organon of absolute knowledge. The recognition of error or negation as internal to the elaboration of thinking's critical self-reflection, is understood by Hegel as an elaboration of the absoluteness of speculative thinking. Negation is understood as determination within the totality of determinations that constitute absolute knowledge. It is for this reason that Hegel describes determinate negation as producing a positive result. Negation or error does not indicate the impossibility or irreducibility of the parts of cognition. It is revealed as a determination within the elaboration of the absolute, which is truth. Negation's determinacy is therefore simultaneously revealed to be positive; a further determination of an ultimately absolute identity.

Adorno's divergence from Hegel here is the source of his construction of a 'negative dialectics'. This renders his claim to speculation highly problematic if it is understood only from its Hegelian perspective. Hegel not only claimed speculation as the distinctive quality of his dialectics, but asserted this explicitly in order to ward off negative versions of dialectic as merely abstract or sceptical foreclosures of the positive elaboration of dialectic. Hegel's understanding of speculation is therefore already conceived against the idea of a negative dialectics. Speculative thinking sublates the negativity of dialectical thinking as a limited moment within an unlimited or absolute process. This is clearly elaborated by Hegel's staging of the moments of philosophical thinking, which constitute the parts of the science of logic. The first stage is thinking as understanding, which 'stops short at the fixed determinacy and its distinctness vis-à-vis other determinacies; such a restricted abstraction counts for the understanding as one that subsists on its own account, and [simply] is.'<sup>24</sup> This constitutes the logic of being. Dialectical thinking is the second stage of logic: 'The *dialectical* moment is the self-sublation of these finite determinations on their own part, and their passing into their

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<sup>24</sup> Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic*, p.125.

opposites.’<sup>25</sup> The third and final stage is speculative thinking: ‘The *speculative* or *positively rational* apprehends the unity of the determinations in their opposition, the *affirmative* that is contained in their dissolution and in their transition.’<sup>26</sup> This tripartite staging of the logic of philosophical thinking exposes how problematic Adorno’s construction of a negative dialectic appears from the perspective of Hegel’s philosophy; particularly when we take seriously Adorno’s claim that negative dialectics maintains a speculative moment. However, it is also decisive for understanding Adorno’s negative dialectics, since it reveals its precise disengagement with Hegel’s articulation of dialectic. Negative dialectics without a speculative dimension would render itself either radically sceptical or simply what dialectic is for Hegel: an arrested moment of the positivity of speculative thinking. The insistence on dialectics as a determinate but negative logic is a paradox from the perspective of Hegel’s speculative logic. But the elaboration of its cogency requires confronting this paradox directly, in the form Adorno outlined for philosophical interpretation, as a riddle whose solution lies within the reconfiguration of its terms.<sup>27</sup> Hegel’s critique of Kant’s thesis of the unknowability of the thing-in-itself becomes a focal point of Adorno’s attempt to develop a materialist or negative dialectics. This attempts to combine the delimitation of constitutive subjectivity proposed by Kant, mobilising it against Hegel; with the critique of formalism and subjectivism proposed by Hegel against Kant. But this dual critique is as precarious as it sounds. In the terms received from Kant and Hegel, it proposes a contradiction. Since Hegel’s

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid. p.128.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. p.131.

<sup>27</sup> As Adorno puts it in the opening lines of the ‘Preface’ to *Negative Dialectics*:

*Negative Dialectics* is a phrase that flouts tradition. As early as Plato, dialectics meant to achieve something positive by means of negation; the figure of a negation of negation later became the succinct term. This book seeks to free dialectics from such affirmative traits without reducing its determinacy. The unfolding of its paradoxical title is one of its aims.

Adorno, *Negative Dialektik* p.9/ Translation p.xix.



critique of Kant's formalism is simultaneously the proposal of constitutive subjectivity or, at least, absolute idealism; and Kant's critique of constitutive subjectivity is simultaneously the proposal of the (transcendental) formality of dialectic; <sup>Adorno's</sup> negative dialectics therefore reveals itself to be an antinomy within the history of philosophy. Its very concept emerges from the history of philosophy dialectically. The antinomic configuration of negative dialectics presents its form as a properly philosophical concept: a speculative idea.

Adorno's account is made clearer when we look closer at Hegel's own understanding of the transition from dialectical to speculative thinking. Hegel insisted that the tripartite separation of understanding, dialectic and speculation, is misleading insofar as all these stages are entwined. The entwinement of dialectics and speculation is crucial here. Speculation is not a separate, but an implicit dimension of dialectic's negativity. It follows from the recognition that the error or negation that dialectic recognises is not indeterminate, but determinate. Recognition of the negativity involved in a claim to identity is therefore not just that, but also a further determination of that identity claim. Error or negation enables its own negation; a negation of negation or positive result. Recognising this positive aspect to negation reveals speculation to be an immanent dimension of dialectics.<sup>28</sup> Adorno does not, therefore, depart from Hegel in the claim that there is a speculative dimension to dialectical negativity. His insistence on determinate negation is consistent with Hegel's rejection of scepticism. The point of difference is over the nature of speculation, specifically its positivity. Adorno's objection to Hegel is over the sense or extent in which negation 'contains what it has resulted from'.<sup>29</sup> Adorno agrees that negation is determinate and therefore generates a

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<sup>28</sup> 'When dialectic has the negative as its result, then, precisely as a result, this negative is at the same time the positive, for it contains what it resulted from sublated within itself, and cannot be without it. This however, is the basic determination of the third form of the Logical, namely, the *speculative* or positively rational [moment].' Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic*, p.131.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* p.131.

result, but disagrees that this result is positive, in the sense of redeeming or sublating all that is involved in the claim to identity:

The nonidentical is not to be obtained directly, as something positive on its part, nor is it obtainable by a negation of the negative. This negation is not an affirmation itself, as it is to Hegel....To equate the negation of the negation with positivity is the quintessence of identification; it is the formal principle in its purest form.<sup>30</sup>

Adorno departs fundamentally from the claim that the concept can sufficiently grasp the non-conceptual, even through recognising it as its negation. To claim this would involve presupposing that the non-conceptual can be made identical with the concept; that the concept can sufficiently grasp the absolute; that the concept is an organon of the absolute: 'that the negation of the negation is something positive can only be upheld by one who presupposes positivity, as all-conceptuality, from the beginning.'<sup>31</sup> Adorno therefore emphatically departs from Hegel's project of absolute idealism, identifying the positivisation of negation as its core.

The significance of dialectics for Adorno is, conversely, its recognition of the radical limitation of conceptualisation's capacity to sufficiently grasp the absolute, without thereby abandoning conceptual determination to claims of immediacy. Unlike Hegel, Adorno does not regard the determinacy of the non-conceptual to be reducible to the concept. Adorno understands the concept to be the result of an experience of the non-conceptual, but not that experience as such. This experience is essential to philosophy for Adorno. It is what he refers to as 'philosophical experience'.<sup>32</sup> Philosophical experience emerges through recognising the limits of conceptualisation in the process of conceptualising something that is not conceptual.

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<sup>30</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialektik* p.161/Translation p.158.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. p.162/Translation p.160.

<sup>32</sup> 'The Introduction [of *Negative Dialectics*] expounds the concept of philosophical experience.' Ibid. p.10/Translation p.xx.



The determination of the concept is therefore not only through the mind or spirit, or the principle of identity; it is also through the non-conceptual, whether that is conceptualised as the material, the somatic or the natural. This irreducible moment of non-conceptual immediacy in conceptual mediation is Adorno's 'materialist' insistence against Hegel's idealism. The recognition of contradiction within conceptualisation is therefore understood as the recognition of the limit to conceptualisation and not the recognition of the absoluteness of conceptualisation.<sup>33</sup> The materialist insistence of Adorno's dialectics is not a materialism. Not only because it does not propose an immediate experience of materiality, but also because its concern is not directly with the establishment of what exists. This is a concern Adorno attributes to science and ontology or metaphysics as a science. He does not propose a new ontology. Negative dialectics proposes a materialist critique of what exists: 'an ontology of the wrong state of things'.<sup>34</sup> Philosophy, for Adorno, is essentially not ontology but critique; the critical self-reflection of what is in terms of what it could be. Philosophical experience is experience which exposes the limits of the conditions of possibility of the present. It involves a transcending of what is established as possible, in order to reconfigure what is possible. This explains Adorno's philosophical interest in extreme experiences, insofar as they are experiences in which the conditions of what is possible is transgressed, exposing new possibilities.<sup>35</sup> The speculative dimension of negative dialectics concerns this

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<sup>33</sup> 'Contradiction is not what Hegel's absolute idealism is bound to transfigure it into: it is not the essence in a Heraclitean sense. It indicates the untruth of identity, the fact that the concept does not exhaust the thing conceived.' Ibid. p.17/Translation p.5.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. p.23/Translation p.11.

<sup>35</sup> Adorno makes this thematic in his introductory remarks to 'Catchwords': 'What is said about theory and praxis brings together, intentionally, philosophical speculation and drastic [*drastische*] experience.' Theodor W. Adorno, *Stichworte* GS Bd.10.2 (Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1977), p.598; trans. H.W.Pickford, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords* (Columbia University Press, New York, 1998), p.126.

transgressive experience. Philosophical experience, as Adorno conceives it, is speculative experience. This speculative experience is not positive. It does not involve a newly sufficient grasp of the absolute. It is negative or critical and, from this, derives its politicised quality of resistance to the status quo:

The power of the status quo puts up facades into which our consciousness crashes. It must crash through them. This alone would free the postulate of depth from ideology. Surviving in such resistance is the speculative moment: what will not have its law prescribed for it by given facts transcends them, even in the closest contact with the objects, and in repudiating a sacrosanct transcendence. Where the thought transcends the bonds it tied in resistance, is its freedom.<sup>36</sup>

The speculative dimension of dialectics is the dimension of transcendence that is required for critical self-reflection. This transcendence, which is not sacrosanct in the sense of a theology or a transcendent ontology, emerges immanently through the intimate experience of finitude. This is the intellectual freedom that is essential to the concept of philosophy, for Adorno.<sup>37</sup>

However, this does not completely resolve or end the question of the relation of speculation and dialectics, since Adorno extends this self-reflection to the critique of dialectics itself; to the 'Self-reflection of Dialectics'.<sup>38</sup> Dialectics, even in the negative form that Adorno proposes, remains tied to the claim to identity. Its virtue is that it brings this claim to critical self-reflection. But it remains tied to it nonetheless, albeit resistantly. The critical self-reflection of dialectics involves, for Adorno, the speculative thinking indicated in the quotation above; namely, whether dialectics can 'transcend the bonds it tied in resistance' and break free from its claim to identity:

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<sup>36</sup> *Negative Dialektik* p.29/ Translation pp.17-8.

<sup>37</sup> See chapter 2 and 3, above.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.* pp.397-400/ Translation pp.405-8.



dialectics is obliged to make a final move: being at once the impression and the critique of the universal delusive context, it must now turn even against itself. The critique of every self-absolutising particular is a critique of the shadow which absoluteness casts upon the critique; it is a critique of the fact that critique itself, contrary to its own tendency, must remain within the medium of the concept. It destroys the claim of identity by testing and honouring it; therefore, it can reach no farther than that claim. The claim is a magic circle which stamps critique with the appearance of absolute knowledge. It is up to the self-reflection of critique to extinguish that claim, to extinguish it in the very negation of negation that will not become a positing.<sup>39</sup>

Adorno's relation to Hegel's speculative thinking is therefore extended to the point of a speculative dissolution of dialectics and, thereby, to a problem that surpasses the articulation of the cogency of a negative dialectics as a coherent experience of the present. The critique of positive dialectics does not insist on dialectics against all else, but the opening of a different horizon to the critique of dialectics: the dissolution of identity as the form of the apprehension of the absolute and the generation of a metaphysics of reconciled non-identity; a metaphysics of difference beyond contradiction:

the absolute, as it hovers before metaphysics, would be the non-identical that refuses to emerge until the compulsion of identity has dissolved. Without a thesis of identity, dialectics is not the whole; but neither will it be a cardinal sin to depart from it in a dialectical step. It lies in the definition of negative dialectics that it will not come to rest in itself, as if it were total. This is its form of hope.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid. pp.397-8/ Translation p.406.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. p.398/ Translation p.406.

The philosophical or speculative experience enabled through the critical self-reflection of identity in negative dialectics thereby opens the possibility of a new organon of experience of the absolute, an experience which does not reduce it to the condition of identity. Insofar as 'man', 'subjectivity' or 'the self' imposes this condition of the possibility of experiencing the absolute, the philosophical experience that negative dialectics enables, promises the dissolution of the anthropomorphisation of the absolute which has limited metaphysics to the logic of self-preservation.

### *Semblance in speculative logic*

Adorno's complex inflection of Kant's dialectic of semblance with Hegel's speculative thinking can be further appreciated through examining the status of semblance in Hegel's logic. Semblance emerges here as a transitional concept within the doctrine of essence. The doctrine of essence is the negative part of the development of logic and is thereby contrasted with the abstract understanding of the doctrine of being, and the positive, speculative reason of the doctrine of the concept or idea. It involves the transition from the immediacy of being to its mediated form, which is crucial to Adorno's dialectical critique of immediacy. Within Hegel's logic of essence, semblance is the concept through which the problematic transition from being to essence takes place, in which the overcoming of being's externality is negotiated. Hegel's concept of semblance is therefore located in the precarious space of Adorno's concept of negative dialectics, which attempts to insist on the 'indissoluble "something"'<sup>41</sup> without thereby claiming that 'something' can be grasped without any mediation. This problem – to be resolved or sublated into the doctrine of the self-relating concept or absolute idea for Hegel – is crucial to Adorno's critique of Hegel's dialectics. It

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<sup>41</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialektik* pp.139-40/Translation pp.134-6.



corresponds precisely to the space of Adorno's negative dialectics as an experience of the non-conceptual, as something mediated by concepts but irreducible to them.

For Hegel, semblance is immediate being considered from the perspective of essence. In terms of essence, it is no longer considered merely immediately as being or nothing, but in terms of its mediation. Its immediacy is therefore considered not true, but a semblance, which, in failing to fully recognise its mediation within essence and appearance – and therefore its movement towards or within the concept – is notably considered by Hegel to be 'degraded':

Essence – as Being that mediates itself with itself through its own negativity – is relation to itself only by being relation to another; but this other is immediately, not as what *is* but as *something-posited* and *mediated*. Being has not vanished; but, in the first place, essence as simple relation to itself is being; while on the other hand, being, according to its one-sided determination of being *something-immediate*, is *degraded* to something merely negative, to a *semblance*. As a result, essence is being as *semblance* within itself.<sup>42</sup>

Hegel's account of semblance therefore reveals its significance for Adorno's interpretation of negative dialectics. It indicates an error in the relation of concept and object, through which both are questioned and recognised in terms of their mediation of one another, but without endorsing complete mediation by the concept, as in Hegel's idealism. This is further demonstrated through Hegel's differentiation of semblance and appearance, whose link in German – *Schein* and *Erscheinen* – should not be missed. Their differentiation is established through the transition of semblance into appearance as a consequence of essence's increasing self-determination, independently of being. Appearance signifies the development of semblance into a more mediated form, sublating the determinations of immediacy

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<sup>42</sup> Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic*, p.175.

characteristic of the doctrine of being, into the determinations of reflection characteristic of the doctrine of essence. Thus, whereas semblance still determines itself residually in terms of being and nothing, its transition involves its determination in terms of appearance and essence:

Essence must appear. Its inward semblance is the sublating of itself into immediacy, which as inward reflection is *subsistence* (matter) as well as *form*, reflection-into-another, subsistence *sublating itself*. Semblance is the determination, in virtue of which essence is not being, but essence, and the developed semblance is appearance [*erscheinen*]. Essence therefore is not *behind* or *beyond* appearance, but since the essence is what exists, existence is appearance.

*Addition.* Existence, posited in its contradiction, is appearance. The latter must not be confused with mere semblance. Semblance is the proximate truth of being or immediacy. The immediate is not what we suppose it to be, not something independent and self-supporting, but only semblance, and as such it is comprehended in the simplicity of self-contained essence.<sup>43</sup>

It is in the twilight of semblance and appearance that Adorno's negative dialectics immanently devolves from Hegel's apprehension of the absolute as the self-relating concept, as absolute knowledge. The speculative experience generated through negative dialectics is a consciousness of non-identity in semblance that is not reducible to the conceptualisation that generates it. Semblance does not give way to truth as absolute conceptual self-determination. But neither is it therefore a limit to the experience of truth as it is for Kant's dialectic. The experience of what transcends conceptualisation is rendered a semblance by the standards of conceptual confirmation. But for this semblance-like experience to be disqualified on that basis as an experience of truth, is to suppress what is nevertheless intimated. Certainty within

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid. pp.199-200, translation altered.



what can be conceptually confirmed or grounded is proper to conceptual knowledge, but not truth. The experience of semblance is for Adorno an experience of truth beyond conceptual determination; that is, beyond what can be coherently experienced by the transcendental subject, the principle of identity: 'In semblance is promised the semblanceless.'<sup>44</sup> It is this experience that Adorno attempts to reveal in the aesthetic constellation of Kant's and Hegel's dialectics.<sup>45</sup>

### *Reflective judgement*

Adorno's criticism of Hegel redeems Kant, and particularly his aesthetics, as providing an account of the semblance quality of philosophical experience. Kant's concept of reflective judgement involves a critical delimitation of subsumptive judgement which echoes Adorno's own critique of identity thinking. However, this analogy is problematic and limited. Although Kant understands reflective judgement in distinction from straightforwardly subsumptive judgement, or what he calls 'determinative judgement', reflective judgement still partakes of

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<sup>44</sup> 'Im Schein verspricht sich das Scheinlose.' Adorno, *Negative Dialektik* p.397/Translation (altered) p.405.

<sup>45</sup> 'Kant called transcendental dialectics a logic of semblance [*eine Logik des Scheins*]: the doctrine of the contradictions in which any treatment of transcendental things as positively knowable is bound to become entangled. His verdict is not made obsolete by Hegel's effort to vindicate the logic of semblance as a logic of truth. But reflection is not cut short by the verdict on semblance. Once made conscious, the semblance is no longer the same. What finite things say about transcendence is the semblance of transcendence; but as Kant well knew, it is a necessary semblance. Hence the incomparable metaphysical significance of the rescue of semblance, the object of aesthetics.' Ibid. p.385-6/Translation p.393.

For Adorno's account of art as this semblance of the semblanceless see 'Truth as Semblance of the Illusionless [*Scheinlosen*]', *Aesthetic Theory*, pp.131-3.

the structure of determination, albeit in a peculiar way.<sup>46</sup> The principle through which reflective judgement achieves determination is the purposiveness of nature:

Judgement's principle concerning the form that things of nature have in terms of empirical laws in general is the *purposiveness of nature* in its diversity. In other words, through this concept we present nature as if an understanding contained the basis of the unity of what is diverse in nature's empirical laws.

Hence the purposiveness of nature is a special a priori concept that has its origin solely in reflective judgement. For we cannot attribute to natural products anything like nature's referring them to purposes, but can only use this concept in order to reflect on nature as regards that connection among nature's appearances which is given to us in terms of empirical laws.<sup>47</sup>

The problem with identifying Adorno's negative dialectics with Kant's aesthetics, is that Kant's account of reflective judgement still thinks the particular through analogy to the systematic unity of subjectivity, namely its purposiveness. The purposiveness of reflective judgements therefore still provides a transcendental principle under which the experience of particulars can be subsumed. Reflective judgement is, after all, still judgement – of the beautiful, for example – and, for Kant, judgement is finally nothing other than determination

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<sup>46</sup> 'Judgement in general is the ability to think the particular as contained under the universal. If the universal (the rule, principle, law) is given, then judgement, which subsumes the particular under it, is determinative...But if only the particular is given and judgement has to find the universal for it, then this power is merely *reflective*...[R]eflective judgement, which is obliged to ascend from the particular in nature to the universal, requires a principle, which it cannot borrow from experience, precisely because it is to be the basis for the unity of all empirical principles under higher though still empirical principles, and hence is to be the basis that makes it possible to subordinate empirical principles to one another in a systematic way.'

Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. W.S.Pluhar (Hackett, Indianapolis, Cambridge, 1987), pp.Ak179-80.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. pp.Ak180-1.



of particulars by universals. The principle of the purposiveness of nature is therefore still subject to the accusation of constituting nature through subjectivity. Indeed, Kant is explicit that this is the case, which is why it remains not only a transcendental principle, but one that does not enable a metaphysical elaboration. Thus, the *Critique of Judgement* is the only one of the three critiques that does not provide the preparation for a metaphysics.<sup>48</sup> Bernstein has sought a radical rereading of Kant's aesthetics, focusing on the non-subsumptive quality of reflective judgements and interpreting this as grounding and destroying the primacy of determinate judgements.<sup>49</sup> This has concentrated on the case of aesthetic reflective judgements in which the purposiveness of the object is simultaneously experienced as without purpose, since this involves a form of judgement without a concept and therefore approximates Adorno's critique of the supremacy of the concept or the principle of identity.<sup>50</sup> However, as Bernstein recognises, this is an awkward enterprise, since aesthetic reflective judgements are still judgements. Furthermore, their lack of purpose is still due to their presentation of a pure form of purposiveness. Its lack of purpose is therefore still understood according to the principle of subjective constitution. As Kant makes clear:

...the liking that, without a concept, we judge to be universally communicable and hence to be the basis that determines a judgement of taste, can be nothing but the subjective purposiveness in the presentation of an object, without any purpose (whether objective or subjective), and hence the mere form of purposiveness, insofar as we are conscious of it, in the presentation by which an object is *given* us.<sup>51</sup>

This is nowhere clearer than in Kant's understanding of the sublime which is the focus of this Adornian reading. Kant characterised the sublime negatively, in contrast to the 'positivity' of

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<sup>48</sup> See 'Draft Introduction' and 'Introduction' to *Critique of Judgement*.

<sup>49</sup> Bernstein, *The Fate of Art*, pp.17-66.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. pp.206-12.

<sup>51</sup> *Critique of Judgement*  
L Ak.221.

the beautiful, as a deeper challenge to the supremacy of the mind: '...a liking for the sublime in nature is only *negative* (whereas a liking for the beautiful is *positive*): it is a feeling that the imagination by its own action is depriving itself of its freedom.'<sup>52</sup> But this does not qualitatively transform the sublime from an experience of determination by subjectivity. The following passage of Kant's could have been used to illustrate the thesis of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*:

What we call sublime in nature outside us, or for that matter in nature within us (e.g. certain affects), becomes interesting only because we present it as a might of the mind to rise above *certain* obstacles of sensibility by means of moral principles.<sup>53</sup>

It is precisely the principle of purposiveness that Hegel identifies as the origin of the transition from critical philosophy to absolute idealism.<sup>54</sup> Adorno's concept of philosophical experience has the dissolution of transcendental subjectivity – as the principle of identity – as its horizon. His deep affinity with Kant's aesthetics is derived from the critique of constitutive subjectivity. Kant's account of reflective judgement corresponds to Adorno's negative dialectics insofar as both attempt to recognise the experience of the determinability of the object, independently or in excess of its reduction to subjective determination. But Adorno's interest in this critique is oriented towards the horizon of the dissolution of this principle of subjectivity. Adorno's appropriation of Kant's aesthetics therefore takes place critically or destructively, through the salvaging of fragments whose significance is transformed by being torn away from their original plan.

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid. p.Ak.269.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. p.Ak.271.

<sup>54</sup> 'The outstanding merit of the *Critique of Judgement* is that Kant has expressed in it the notion and even the thought of *the Idea*. The notion of an *intuitive understanding*, of *inner* purposiveness, etc., is the *universal* concurrently thought of as the *concrete* in itself. It is only in these notions that Kant's philosophy shows itself to be *speculative*...' Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic*, p.102.



### Speculative philosophy: Benjamin

The development of Adorno's concept of philosophical experience through the critique of Kant and Hegel is motivated more locally, if obscurely, by his reception of Benjamin's speculative philosophy. Adorno's commitment to Benjamin's, 'own resolute, salutary speculative theory'<sup>55</sup> is announced, problematically, in his criticism of its presentation of *The Arcades Project*: 'It is the claim of this theory that I am bringing against you'.<sup>56</sup> But what is involved in this problematic commitment?

Benjamin's speculative philosophy has been recently elaborated by Howard Caygill as the project of 'an anti-Hegelian speculative philosophy driven by the nihilistic refusal of any attempt to grasp or comprehend the absolute through finite categories.'<sup>57</sup> Caygill characterises this as involving the establishment of transcendental conditions of experience (understood in Kantian terms), which are further grounded by the oblique experience of the absolute or infinity of which these transcendental conditions are a limited expression.<sup>58</sup> This speculative experience of the absolute emerges through excessive or disruptive moments

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<sup>55</sup> This is from Adorno's letter to Benjamin of 10 November 1938, Adorno et al, *Aesthetics and Politics*, p.129-30.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid. p.130. See sub-section 'Ideas' in chapter 4, above

<sup>57</sup> 'The 'philosophy of the future' intimated by Benjamin and partially realised in his later works introduced the 'absolute' or 'infinite' into Kant's deliberately finitist concept of experience...The 'coming philosophy' is an anti-Hegelian speculative philosophy driven by the nihilistic refusal of any attempt to grasp or comprehend the absolute through finite categories'.

Howard Caygill, *Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience* (Routledge, London, New York, 1998) p.1. Caygill's differentiation of Benjaminian from Hegelian speculation is not declaratively one-sided: 'It should be noted here that 'Hegelian speculative philosophy' refers to Benjamin's interpretation of it as a totalising metaphysics; for a divergent reading see Gillian Rose, *Hegel: Contra Sociology...*' Ibid. fn.12, p.154.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid. p.6.

within these transcendental conditions: that is, within the established conditions of the possibility of experience and therefore knowledge. Caygill identifies a tension or constitutive problem in Benjamin's elaboration of the consequences of this speculative experience, which indicates two radically incompatible projects: a Platonic dissolution of transcendental conditions into absolute conditions and a Nietzschean dissolution of transcendental conditions into a formless multiplicity of conditions.<sup>59</sup> Benjamin's thought is characterised by the often precarious tension between these two aspects. But this split is also the breakdown of another distinctive project characterised by their mutual inflection. This generates a further characteristic tension of Benjamin's writings: between, on the one hand, sustaining the distinction between the speculative experience of the absolute and the transcendental conditions of experience that it reveals; and, on the other hand, dissolving these transcendental conditions of experience into pure speculative experience or absolute experience. The danger of the latter is an end to a critical concept of experience and thereby what the distinction promises: a critique of the reduction of the absolute to merely anthropomorphic or conventional conditions.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> 'In the first option, Benjamin makes the Platonic move of replacing the doctrine of categories with a doctrine of eternal ideas, while in the second he is closer to the anti-Platonism of Nietzsche in dissolving the categories into a 'uniform and continuous' generation of a multiplicity of knowledges. In the first, the categories are lifted out of time, producing an unspeculative formalism of abstracted and timeless ideas, while in the second they are submerged in time, threatening to disappear in a welter of diverse and continually changing patterns and orderings of experience. The first is a formal idealism, the second a material empiricism.' Ibid. p.26.

<sup>60</sup> 'The implication of the immanent totality in spatio-temporal experience is understood by Benjamin in two inconsistent and even contradictory ways. The first stresses complexity, and looks to the ways in which an immanent totality may manipulate itself in the complex patterns and distortions of spatio-temporal experience. The other dissolves space and time into totality, and threatens to collapse the complexity of spatio-temporal patterning into a closed 'redemptive' immanence. The latter would mark the advent of a speculative philosophy without transcendental supplement, one which dissolves



Caygill accuses Adorno of failing to understand Benjamin's concept of speculation, mistaking its intention by reducing it to a Hegelian form of dialectic.<sup>61</sup> However, the Hegelian dimension of Adorno's criticism is not orthodox, but is intended to serve Benjamin's own speculative thought, and, moreover, through emphasising the tension that Caygill seeks to emphasise.<sup>62</sup> Adorno's criticism of Benjamin's name-like concealment of his concepts is made in order to prevent the impression that the absolute is presented directly, independently of the conditions of conceptual experience; and therefore precisely in the name of the inflection of transcendental and speculative experience that Caygill discerns.<sup>63</sup> It is in order to resolve this that Adorno appeals to Hegel's negative thinking of the absolute through concepts.<sup>64</sup> Caygill's elaboration of Benjamin's non-Hegelian form of speculative philosophy secretly elaborates Adorno's concept of speculative thinking; just as Rose's anti-metaphysical account of Hegelian speculation secretly elaborates Adorno's negative dialectics.<sup>65</sup> Where

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all the conditions of possible experience into emanations of the absolute. The dissolution of spatio-temporal complexity into an absolute, immanent purity is on the whole successfully resisted in Benjamin's writing, although it occasionally manifests itself in those moments of 'pure spirit' which abolish any trace of externality or remainder.' Ibid. pp.6-7.

<sup>61</sup> 'It was Adorno's misunderstanding of Benjamin's speculative philosophy that led to their differences in the 1930s, when Adorno attempted to reorient Benjamin's concept of experience in terms of the neo-Hegelian concepts of totality and mediation.' Ibid. fn.6, p.153.

<sup>62</sup> Caygill attributes to Adorno a critique of Benjamin's empiricism which fails to acknowledge the tension. See Ibid. fn.33, p.155.

<sup>63</sup> See Adorno's letter to Benjamin, 10 November 1938, in Adorno et al *Aesthetics and Politics* pp.129-30. See sub-section 'Ideas' in chapter 4, above.

<sup>64</sup> 'Benjamin's defeatism about his own thought was conditioned by the undialectical positivity of which he carried a formally unchanged remnant from his theological phase into his materialistic phase. By comparison, Hegel's equating negativity with the thought that keeps philosophy from both the positivity of science and the contingency of dilettantism has experiential content.' [Erfahrungsgehalt]. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, p.30/Translation p.19.

<sup>65</sup> See section 'Dialectical and speculative thinking' above, and Gillian Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology* (Athlone, London, 1981,1995).

Adorno departs from Caygill's elaboration is that he does not understand speculative experience to need a 'transcendental' supplement, at least, not if transcendental is to be understood in its conventional Kantian sense. Furthermore, he does not see refusal of a positive presentation of the absolute to lead to its establishment as a methodological or diagnostic principle as Caygill proposes.<sup>66</sup> The result of a 'morality of method' is also the outcome of Adorno's critique of Hegel according to Rose.<sup>67</sup> Speculative thinking which proceeds from the negative experience of the absolute constructs a form of constellational script which is neither purely speculative, nor transcendental, nor the methodological tension between the two.

Hegel's dialectics sustains the apprehension of the absolute, or speculative experience, without positing it immediately. The negative dimension of conceptualisation which is made central to negative dialectics, therefore presents speculative experience in terms of its finite conditions without thereby reducing the absolute to them. However, this derivation from Hegel is transformed by Adorno's reception of Benjamin. Through the model of constellatory thinking, Adorno understands this negative thinking of the absolute non-teleologically or non-progressively; in such a way that the absolute is not reduced to the totalisation of its conceptual self-determination, but is experienced as a transcendence of conceptualisation, and therefore a transcendence of Hegel's absolutisation of conceptualisation or absolute knowledge.<sup>68</sup> Benjamin's theologically inspired distinction of

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<sup>66</sup> '...in most of his writings Benjamin sustains the poise between transcendental and speculative philosophy by recognising the speculative immanent totality as a principle of method, or in the words of the *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, as a diagnostic 'sign of a Messianic cessation of happening' through which to discern what has been excluded by a particular condition of legibility or set of conditions of possible experience.' Caygill, *Walter Benjamin*, Ibid. pp.6-7.

<sup>67</sup> Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, p.31.

<sup>68</sup> See sub-section '*Constellation versus sublation*' in chapter 4, above.



the order of knowledge and the order of truth has a simultaneously materialist dimension insofar as it criticises the anthropomorphism of absolute knowledge.<sup>69</sup> This point of indifference between Benjamin's theological and materialist phases is that tension that Adorno attempts to sustain through a negative dialectics oriented towards its speculative self-reflection.<sup>70</sup> The critical distinction of absolute conceptualisation and the experience of the absolute, ruins the redemptive structure of Hegel's speculative thinking. Negativity, error and non-identity are no longer redeemed into the eternal movement of spirit. For Adorno – following the ironically historical materialist orientation of Benjamin's speculative thought – speculative experience is understood as a disruption or interruption of the order of knowledge. It therefore leads to constellatory reconfigurations of the order of knowledge, not sublations of it. However, the distinction of constellation and sublation should not repress the deep affinity that they both share and that enables Adorno to generate his dialectical reading of Benjamin. Both sublation and constellation proceed through a process of dissolution and preservation or destruction and salvation. Both involve a transformation of problems or contradictions into solutions through the transformation of their elements. In Hegel this process is positive, or fully preserves what is dissolved, leading to a progressive and continuous movement of the unfolding of spirit. Whereas, for Adorno, following Benjamin, the salvation of what is destroyed is not understood as positive and therefore immanently progressive, but as a discontinuous process generated through irreparable loss. This generates an alternative experience of semblance. For Hegel, the semblance of being – which is generated by thinking non-being only in terms of being – reveals itself to be an appearance of

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<sup>69</sup> Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, pp.27-30.

<sup>70</sup> 'Although dialectics allows us to think the absolute, the absolute mediated by dialectics remains in bondage to conditioned thinking. If Hegel's absolute was the secularisation of the deity, it was still the deity's secularisation; even as the totality of spirit, that absolute remained chained to its finite human model.' Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, p.397/Translation (altered) p.405.

essence within the emergent self-determination of the concept. In Adorno the speculative experience of semblance involves exposure to an uncertainty of being that does not reveal itself to be immanent to the progressive development of the concept, but a disruption of that development. Preservation is therefore not immanently guaranteed. The speculative experience of semblance is generated through a more destructive experience of loss and disjuncture .. Stressing this point of divergence should not conceal the affinities. Adorno's interest in Hegel's dialectics is precisely insofar as mediation takes place *not* through the average equivalence of two contradictory terms (their synthesis), but through their extreme contradiction; at the point at which the coherence of one term breaks down and reveals its relation to what initially appeared external to it. Adorno radicalises this extreme mediation to the point at which the teleological substructure of Hegelian mediation is destroyed as a presupposition.

The decisive outcome of Adorno's Benjaminian critique of Hegel is a thinking of the discontinuous temporal or historical experience of truth, and therefore, a thinking of history removed from its theological form as the unfolding of an eternal plan. Speculative experience is tied to the experience of an interruption of a transcendent order. At these points of disruption, what had seemed to be true is revealed as a semblance of truth. Philosophy's occupation with truth becomes the melancholy experience of a semblance or illusion, discarded by the historical process. This experience of loss is not, however, simply negative or a dissolution. The melancholic experience of semblance sees in the historically decayed image of the lost truth, a point of externality to the present order of truth. This melancholy mis-recognises itself if it thinks that it remains true to an eternal order of transcendent truths. It is constituted by the destructive process of history which not only generates its melancholic longing for a transcendent ideal, but constitutes that melancholy itself as the experience of the historical loss of that ideal. Once that ideal is recognised as a semblance – that is, once



semblance becomes conscious of itself as semblance – that melancholy is transformed by the consciousness of the transformation of the ideal that has taken place through its mourning of it. This reveals an experience of transcendence that is not just oriented fatefully towards the lamentation of the past; but which is the apprehension of something distinct from the continuum of that past, something new, generated through the discontinuity of the past and the present.<sup>71</sup> The mis-recognition of this transformative experience of mourned ideals is effectively the criticism that Adorno directs at Kant, Hegel and Benjamin. Contra Kant, the semblance of the ideal, once made self-conscious, is transformative, not merely regulative. It involves a reconfiguration of the conditions of knowledge, rather than their regulation from an ideal order that is external to the reconfigurations presented by the disruptive course of history. Contra Hegel, this experience of semblance is not reducible to the reconstitution of an absolute immanence of conceptual determination, in which truth is presupposed as an eternal continuum which is not articulated fundamentally by historical discontinuity. Contra Benjamin, this experience of semblance emerges purely historically, from the negative experience of finite elements, and is not immediately presentable as a timeless, pre-given order, or positivistically in particular facts.<sup>72</sup> The transcendence of finitude emerges only negatively.

### **Metaphysical experience**

The experience of the limits of what can be confirmed to exist may only be a semblance, but if that experience of semblance is brought to self-consciousness and still persists in indicating something beyond what can be verified, then that experience makes a claim on what is not simply immanent to the finite conditions of experience; it makes a claim on the absolute.

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<sup>71</sup> See discussion of mourning and melancholy in chapter 6, below.

<sup>72</sup> See section 'Historical metaphysics' in chapter 6, below.

Experiences of this kind enable a formation of metaphysics that is not the presentation of a transcendent order of the absolute. The absolute is not presented immediately. Its semblance character is subject to time and emerges through the passing of time, in experiences which reveal the limits of time through time. These experiences are for Adorno paradigmatically experiences of 'idle waiting' or 'waiting in vain', where the experience of loss is brought to self-consciousness of the extent to which what is longed for is only presentable as a deferral.<sup>73</sup> Adorno identifies this in Proust's discussion of names in *Remembrance of Things Past*, which presents a secular version of the explicitly theological discussion of names in Benjamin's *Origin of German Tragic Drama*:

What is a metaphysical experience? If we distain projecting it upon allegedly primal religious experiences, we are most likely to visualise it as Proust did, in the happiness, for instance, that is promised by place names like Thelneatham, Thetford and Bishop's Stortford. One thinks that going there would really bring the fulfilment, as if there were such a thing. Being really there makes the promise recede like a rainbow. And yet one is not disappointed; the feeling now is one of being too close, rather, and not seeing it for that reason.<sup>74</sup>

Metaphysical experience emerges through the self-consciousness that the immediate presentation of the absolute is a semblance, but a semblance that, once brought to self-consciousness, is not just a delusion, but a critically self-conscious experience of what is beyond what can be confirmed to be objective experience; that is, <sup>beyond</sup> what can be established as

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<sup>73</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialektik* p.368/Translation p.375.

<sup>74</sup> *Negative Dialektik* p.366/ Translation (altered) p.373. I have followed Ashton's example of fully engaging in this experience. Adorno's own place-names were Otterbach, Watterbach, Reuehthal and Monbrunn. See Marcel Proust, 'Place-names: The Place' in 'Within a Budding Grove' *Remembrance of Things Past* vol.1, trans. C.K.Scott Moncrieff and T.Kilmartin (Penguin Books, London, 1983), pp.691-1021; and Benjmain, 'The Word as Idea', *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, pp.35-8.



universal and necessary experience. The happiness in the absence of the immediate experience of place is an experience of this temporally self-conscious experience of semblance. The identification of the place by its complete conceptual determination, has given way to an affinity between the experience of the place and the concepts that invoke the presence of that place, by acknowledging the extent to which they do not sufficiently present it. The absolute is not asserted positively in the immanent context of finite experience. It is presented only negatively through the immanence of finite conditions, but as their limits; as the immanently emerging transcendence these conditions.

Metaphysical experience is understood, by Adorno, strictly in terms of the process of secularisation as the dissolution of a transcendent order of truth beyond the immanence of finite human experience. Metaphysical experience emerges precisely through the disillusionment of aspirations to an immediately presentable transcendent order. However, its disillusionment is also directed at the illusion of a completely immanent order of the present. This is its relation to the dialectic of enlightenment. If enlightenment leads to the dissolving of metaphysics into the immanence of a finite present – thereby interpreting any suggestion of a transcendent ontology as a theological myth – enlightenment also threatens to generate a myth of its own, insofar as its insistence on the immanence of the present obscures its own conditions and what would be beyond it. This reversion of enlightenment into myth, which reveals myth to have been itself enlightenment, is the fundamental thesis of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.<sup>75</sup> Metaphysical experience is the critical self-reflection through which that fateful reversion is suspended. The disillusionment of the semblance of transcendence, must

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<sup>75</sup> 'The principle of immanence, the explanation of every event as a repetition, that the Enlightenment upholds against mythic imagination, is the principle of myth itself.' Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, p.28/Translation p.12.

simultaneously reveal the limits of immanence. This is the task of enlightenment that metaphysics pursues for Adorno.<sup>76</sup>

The mournfulness of metaphysics is also directed at its interpretation of the tradition through which metaphysical ideas are transmitted, that is, traditional philosophy. This can be elaborated through Adorno's critique of Kant's idea of the intelligible world or *mundus intelligibilis*. Kant introduces this idea of reason in *Critique of Pure Reason* as the 'The Ideal of the Highest Good, as a Determining Ground of the Ultimate End of Pure Reason'.<sup>77</sup> It is central to the question of what one may hope for. It is generated as a consequence of the metaphysical need to have an image of a moral world, in which the moral law would be instantiated, in order that that law cannot be disregarded as purely ideal and therefore not effective within the present; in order, therefore, that it can have actual authority within the present. It has a kind of twilight existence or semblance character as a consequence of the actuality that its ideality must have.<sup>78</sup> As such it is crucial to the idea of the future as a future in which morality would be realised.<sup>79</sup> The idea of an intelligible world is therefore formed

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<sup>76</sup> See sections 'Historical Metaphysics' and 'Ideology-critique' in chapter 6, below.

<sup>77</sup> See Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, pp.A804-19/B833-47.

<sup>78</sup> '...since the moral law remains binding for everyone in the use of his freedom, even though others do not act in conformity with the law, neither the nature of the things of the world nor the causality of the actions themselves and their relation to morality determine how the consequences of these actions will be related to happiness. The alleged necessary connection of the hope of happiness with the necessary endeavour to render the self worthy of happiness cannot therefore be known through reason. It can be counted upon only if a *Supreme Reason*, that governs according to moral rules, be likewise posited as underlying nature as its cause. The idea of such an intelligence...I entitle the *ideal of the supreme good*.' Ibid. p.A810/B838

<sup>79</sup> '...since we are necessarily constrained by reason to represent ourselves as belonging to such a world, while the senses present to us nothing but a world of appearances, we must assume that moral world to be a consequence of our conduct in the world of sense (in which no such connection between worthiness and happiness is exhibited), and therefore to be for us a future world. Thus God and a



through precisely that tension that is characteristic of metaphysical experience for Adorno. However, in contrast to Kant, this idea is for Adorno a phenomenon of experience, albeit an experience of the transcendence of the finite mind:

The intelligible, in the spirit of Kantian delimitation no less than in that of the Hegelian method, would be to transcend the limits drawn by both of these, to think in negations alone. Paradoxically, the intelligible sphere which Kant envisioned would once again be 'appearance' [*Erscheinung*]: it would be what that which is hidden from the finite mind [*Geist*] shows to that mind, what the mind is forced to think and, due to its own finiteness, to disfigure. The concept of the intelligible is the self-negation of the finite mind. In the mind, mere entity becomes aware of its deficiency; the departure from an existence obdurate in itself is the source of what separates the mind from its nature-controlling principle.<sup>80</sup>

The intelligible world is rendered an appearance – in the sense that its semblance becomes an object of experience – but of a liminal kind. Rational ideas are rendered historical phenomena which constitute finite experience by revealing its limitation by what is beyond it, the infinite. This dissolves its claim to identity, the mythic principle of immanence and self-preservation. Adorno's departure from Kant is therefore not merely through this historicisation of the ideas of reason as mourned semblances, but through the apprehension of an experience of the absolute free <sup>from</sup> the principle of identity, the principle of subjectivity. This would be an historical metaphysics of critical self-dissolution.

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future life are two postulates which, according to the principles of pure reason, are inseparable from the obligation which that same reason imposes upon us.'

Ibid. p.A811/B839.

<sup>80</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialektik* p.384/ Translation p.392.

## Chapter 6

**Time-consciousness**

The destruction of a transhistorical concept of truth generates a fundamental crisis for the classical concept of philosophy, which, as for instance in Plato, understands truth as fundamentally independent of the temporal appearances it may have.<sup>1</sup> Adorno's historical critique of philosophy remains essentially oriented to truth. The possibility of philosophy therefore becomes the possibility of a temporal, historical concept of truth. Time is transformed from the cause of philosophy's crisis into its solution. Philosophy becomes 'a theory which holds that the core of truth is historical.'<sup>2</sup> Adorno identifies Hegel as the herald of this project: 'that philosophy is the vested bearer of eternal truth...is exploded by Hegel's astounding proposition that philosophy is its own time comprehended in thought. The requirement seemed so self-evident to him that he did not hesitate to introduce it as a definition.'<sup>3</sup> Habermas also identifies Hegel as inaugurating the question of time or, more specifically, modernity as fundamental to the 'need for philosophy.'<sup>4</sup> However, Habermas's

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<sup>1</sup> See Plato, 'Education of the Philosopher', in *The Republic*, trans. D.Lee, (Penguin Books, London, 1955), pp.265-294.

<sup>2</sup> Adorno, 'Zur Neuausgabe' *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, p.9/ Translation, p.xi.

<sup>3</sup> Adorno, 'Why Still Philosophy?', pp.15-6.

<sup>4</sup> '[O]nly at the end of the eighteenth century did the problem of modernity's *self-reassurance* [*Selbstvergewisserung*] come to a head in such a way that Hegel could grasp this question as a philosophical problem, and indeed as *the fundamental philosophical problem* of his own philosophy. The anxiety caused by the fact that a modernity without models had to stabilise itself on the basis of the very diremptions [or divisions: *Entzweiungen*] it had wrought is seen by Hegel as 'the source of the need for philosophy.' As modernity awakens to consciousness of itself, a need for self-reassurance arises, which Hegel understands as a need for philosophy. He sees philosophy confronted with the task of grasping *its own* time – and for him that means the modern age – in thought. Hegel is



renewal of the philosophical discourse of modernity attempts to suspend the philosophical claim to truth sustained by Hegel and, negatively, by Adorno.<sup>5</sup>

Hegel's solution is, however, not Adorno's. It depends on philosophy's totalisation of time within its historical present. Truth coincides with time at its end and finds its correspondence to eternity there. Hegel can therefore still identify truth and eternity: 'philosophy aims at understanding what is unchangeable, eternal, in and for itself: its end is truth.'<sup>6</sup> Hegel's definition of philosophy as the thought of its time is thereby entwined with his speculative proposition that the real is rational: 'To comprehend *what is* is the task of philosophy, for *what is* is reason. As far as the individual is concerned, each individual is in any case a *child of his time*; thus philosophy, too, is *its own time comprehended in thoughts*.'<sup>7</sup> Hegel's most extensive elaboration of philosophy as the thought of its time and its relation to other disciplines in this task, takes place in the methodological reflections that provide the 'Introduction' to his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*. Philosophy is understood to be the fundamental aspect of the process whereby each age assumes the task of appropriating the

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convinced that he cannot possibly obtain philosophy's concept of itself independently of the philosophical concept of modernity.' Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, p.16.

<sup>5</sup> See sub-section 'Modernism' in chapter 1, above. The genealogy of this discourse on modernity, as a specifically philosophical form, has also been diagnosed by Foucault to have begun in Kant, as the heart of his conception of enlightenment as a critical ontology of the subject within the present:

The critical ontology of ourselves must be considered not, certainly, as a theory, a doctrine, nor even as a permanent body of knowledge that is accumulating; it must be conceived as an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them [*de leur franchissement possible*].

Michel Foucault, 'What is Enlightenment?', trans. C.Porter in ed. P.Rabinow, *Ethic: Subjectivity and Truth* Essential Works, vol.1, (Penguin Books, London, New York, 1997), p.319.

<sup>6</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, vol.1, trans. E.S. Haldane and Frances H. Simson, (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1968), pp.7-8.

<sup>7</sup> Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, p.21.

knowledge that has developed within it. This involves the appropriation of the past such that it is made present and, in so doing, both preserving and enriching it, thereby raising it to a higher level. It is in this sense that philosophy is defined as the thought of its time.

Philosophy is not the whole of this process. It is one aspect of a complex combination of aspects that are unified by the 'spirit of the time'; one form in which spirit is externalised. This characterises its relation to the totality of forms externalised by the spirit of a particular time. Philosophy does not stand in a mechanistic relation of cause and effect to other forms of its time – such as political history, kinds of government, art, religion, etc. – either as their sufficient cause or effect. Its relation is mediated, one might even say suffused, through a common element, spirit. This is the medium through which philosophy relates to the other aspects or expressions of the totality of forms at a particular time.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, Hegel claims that philosophy is not the discipline that attempts to show how the spirit of a time moulds the actuality of everything within it. This is the job of 'philosophic world-history'. Philosophy is distinguished insofar as it deals with the spiritual as opposed to the actual dimension of its time. It is therefore immanently historical insofar as it is an aspect of the spirit of its time. However, it is not thereby actually subjected to time itself. It is subjected to its time only as a consequence of the content that it forms in expressing the form of its time. But in establishing the form of its time, philosophy objectifies it and stands above it. Philosophy is therefore the subject of its time, bringing it to self-consciousness through objectifying its actuality. Philosophy thereby raises itself above its time even though it has emerged through it.<sup>9</sup> It is

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<sup>8</sup> Hegel, 'Introduction', *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, vol.1, p.54.

<sup>9</sup> '[I]f philosophy does not stand above its time in content, it does so in form, because, as the thought and knowledge of that which is the substantial spirit of its time, it makes that spirit its object. In as far as philosophy is in the spirit of its time, the latter is its determined content in the world, although as knowledge, philosophy is above it, since it places it in the relation of object. But this is in form alone, for philosophy really has no other content. This knowledge itself undoubtedly is the actuality of spirit,



notable that Hegel's account of philosophy's transcendence of its time does not result in a transcendence of time as such. This transcendence is, itself, understood in a temporal mode: philosophy's transcendence of its time is the emergence of the future:

Through knowledge, spirit makes manifest a distinction between knowledge and that which is; this knowledge is thus what produces a new form of development. The new forms at first are only special modes of knowledge, and it is thus that a new philosophy is produced: yet since it already is a wider kind of spirit, it is the inward birth-place of the spirit which will later arrive at the actual form.<sup>10</sup>

Philosophy is therefore attributed an avant-garde temporality, prefiguring a new epoch of spirit. This inflects the mournful characterization of philosophy given in *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*: 'When philosophy paints its grey in grey, a shape of life has grown old, and it cannot be rejuvenated, but only recognized, by the grey in grey of philosophy; the owl of Minerva begin its flight only at the onset of dusk.'<sup>11</sup> In the light of Hegel's lectures, Minerva flies towards a new dawn.

Adorno's appeal to Hegel's philosophy as the thought of its time is combined with the abandonment of philosophy's capacity to present the absolute otherwise than negatively. This is the effect of time on the problem of truth, for Adorno, and the condition of a temporal or historical concept of truth. Hegel's characterisation of philosophy as the thought of its time is identified with the apologetics associated with the identity of reality and reason: 'Traditional philosophy's claim to totality, culminating in the thesis that the real is rational, is

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the self-knowledge of spirit which previously was not present: thus the formal difference is also a real and actual difference.' Ibid. pp.54-5.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p.55

<sup>11</sup> G.W.F.Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. H.B.Nisbet (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, New York, 1991), p.23.

indistinguishable from apologetics.'<sup>12</sup> The attempt to revive philosophy as the thought of its time, without thereby reviving its claim to <sup>be</sup>able to sufficiently totalise time, comes to define the task of philosophy for Adorno. Hegel's achievement is therefore rendered both exemplary and problematic.<sup>13</sup> If time destroys the positive presentation of the absolute or truth – if, that is, time or history is an infinite that exceeds any attempt at its totalisation – this opens the question of a negative presentation of the absolute as a way of thinking a temporal concept of truth. The temporality of truth and the truth of temporality become the problem of a negative or critical apprehension of the absolute as an inherently historical discipline. Philosophy ceases to present the absolute positively, and history ceases to be a relativistic dissolution of truth or a presentation of facts indifferent to the problem of the absolute. As Adorno and Horkheimer claim programmatically: 'Our conception of history does not presume any dispensation from it; nor does it imply a positivistic search for information. As the critique of philosophy it refuses to abandon philosophy.'<sup>14</sup> Philosophy becomes history and history becomes philosophy, both transformed by the problem of an historical absolute.

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<sup>12</sup> Adorno, 'Why Still Philosophy?', p.7.

<sup>13</sup> '[Hegel] was the first to gain insight into the temporal nucleus of truth. This was connected for him with the confidence that every significant philosophy, by expressing its own stage of consciousness as a necessary aspect of the totality, at the same time also expressed the totality. The fact that this confidence together with the philosophy of identity met with disappointment lessens not only the pathos of subsequent philosophies but also their standing. What for Hegel was self-evident cannot possibly be claimed by the regnant philosophies today...' Ibid. pp.15-6.

<sup>14</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, p.10/ Translation p.x.



### The idea of natural history

Adorno's development of philosophy as time-consciousness is indicated in his conception of the idea of natural history.<sup>15</sup> The intention of the idea of natural history is, 'to dialectically overcome the usual antithesis of nature and history.'<sup>16</sup> It seeks to overcome the antithesis of naturalism and historicism, and thereby the crisis that is created for the concept of truth by that antithesis, a crisis that is also a crisis for philosophy. Adorno's principal strategic motivation in the development of this idea is to elaborate an historical materialist dialectics and thereby the materialist philosophy of history that Marx had, in some sense at least, invoked but not provided.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, his motivation is to develop this as an alternative to the ontological philosophy of history being developed by the post-Husserlian phenomenology, in particular by Heidegger. Adorno argues that Heidegger's attempt to overcome the separation of nature and history through the concept of 'historicity' fails to overcome it, because nature and history are simply conflated or collapsed into one another according to an essentially idealistic structure, despite the existential-ontological nature of Heidegger's language. This is because, on the one hand, historicity conflates history and being through the presentation of an encompassing whole or fundamental identity, which is formally rationalist regardless of its 'irrational' contents; and, on the other hand, historicity is thereby instituted as a structure of possibility, relating to ontical history or being as its content in a fundamentally formalistic and thereby idealistic way, regardless of the materialist inflection of its terminology. These criticisms are elaborated through an alternative solution

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<sup>15</sup> See Theodor W. Adorno, 'The Idea of Natural History', trans. R.Hullot-Kentor, *Telos* no.60 (Summer 1984), pp.111-24; and 'World Spirit and Natural History' *Negative Dialectics*, pp.300-60.

<sup>16</sup> Adorno, 'The Idea of Natural History', p.111.

<sup>17</sup> See for instance, Karl Marx, 'Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts', in *Karl Marx, Early Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton, (Penguin Books, London, 1975), pp.354-355.

that seeks to resolve the conflict of nature and history through an emphasis on, rather than the dissolution of, the opposition of nature and history.<sup>18</sup> Adorno proposes a paradox as a solution: the overcoming or reconciliation of the separation of nature and history through the mediation of their extreme opposition:

If the question of the relation of nature and history is to be seriously posed, then it only offers any chance of a solution if it is possible *to comprehend historical being in its most extreme historical determinacy, where it is most historical, as natural being, or if it were possible to comprehend nature as an historical being where it seems to rest most deeply in itself as nature.*<sup>19</sup>

This paradoxical formulation states, on reflection, a self-evident test. If there is really an overcoming of the separation between nature and history, then history must be able to be understood as nature even in its most extreme historicity. If it cannot, their separation has not been overcome, and vice versa. This introduces a form of concrete historical interpretation, oriented towards history at it is most natural, and nature at it is most historical. The mediation of nature and history at their extremes displaces any assumption of an encompassing whole. The reconciliation of nature and history is only invoked negatively as the end point of extreme mediation and not presupposed. Furthermore, it does not propose a formal structure of natural history which can be illustrated or confirmed with content. It proposes an interpretation of phenomena in which this extreme mediation is examined and demonstrated to take place. This enables, quite literally, a historical materialist dialectic. Natural history is therefore an idea or model, in the sense that Adorno had elaborated in 'The Actuality of

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<sup>18</sup> 'Every exclusion of natural stasis from the historical dynamic leads to false absolutes, every isolation of the historical dynamic from the unsurpassably natural elements in it leads to false spiritualism.' Ibid. p.117.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. p.117.



Philosophy'.<sup>20</sup> It emerges, not through the insistence on a transhistorical and unsolvable problem, but through problems emerging immanently from the development of knowledge or the sciences; in this case the twin problems of naturalism and spiritualism. It does not impose a solution through the attempt to impose a supra-scientific order of truth. It emerges as the reconfiguration of a problem such that it can be read as a solution; unravelling the riddle of natural history as the name of a solution. Its solution is not the end but the beginning of a task through which a solution can be established; namely, the interpretation of history as nature and nature as history. Its elaboration takes place through the configuration of constellations in which this problem is interpreted such that it can be read as a solution.

The idea of natural history appears to suggest an alternative to Hegel's speculative proposition that: 'What is rational is actual; and what is actual is rational.'<sup>21</sup> Natural history is understood speculatively by Adorno, following Hegel, in the sense that the identity of nature and history is only established through the experience of their negativity or difference in its most extreme expression – when nature appears most historical and when history appears most natural – and it is only through this mutually transformative process that their identity can be said to be true; not simply through reducing nature to history as the predicate of a subject or vice versa. The idea of natural history avoids the 'apologetics' Adorno accuses Hegel's proposition of, by presenting itself as a critical task that is to be achieved without the assumption of a progressive substructure of sublation, but rather, through the interpretation of moments of extreme mediation, combined non-progressively and non-hierarchically in constellations, which attempt to present the achieved identity of nature and history negatively, as the dissolution of the residual compulsion in the need to identify one term with

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<sup>20</sup> See chapter 2.

<sup>21</sup> Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, p.20.

another.<sup>22</sup> That is, to present their reconciliation in which the compulsion to collapse one term into another has dissolved as a result of their actual mediation. This would be a reconciliation that emerged as the result of a dissolution or suspension of the compulsive character of identity; a suspension of the domination of one term with the other, and therefore the need which motivates this domination. It therefore invokes through its negativity a reconciliation beyond the identity of its two terms, nature and history.<sup>23</sup>

Lukács and Benjamin present for Adorno an engagement with the idea of natural history from opposing sides. In *The Theory of the Novel*, Lukács interprets the reified world of human conventions as a second nature, despite recognising it as historically created; indeed, despite conceiving of it as an extremely artificial human creation. And yet, it is experienced as a new form of nature.<sup>24</sup> Thus, nature and history are mediated in their

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<sup>22</sup> Gillian Rose has emphasised the negative experience demanded in the reading of Hegel's speculative propositions:

To read a proposition 'speculatively' means that the identity which is affirmed between subject and predicate is seen equally to affirm a lack of identity between subject and predicate. This reading implies an identity different from the merely formal one of the ordinary proposition. This different kind of identity cannot be pre-judged, that is, it cannot be justified in a transcendental sense, and it cannot be stated in a proposition of the kind to be eschewed. This different kind of identity must be understood as a result to be achieved.

From this perspective the 'subject' is not fixed, nor the predicates accidental: they acquire their meaning in a series of relations to each other. Only when the lack of identity between subject and predicate has been experienced, can their identity be grasped.

Gillian Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, pp.48-9.

Adorno's departure from Hegel concerns the nature of this 'series of relations', as a 'task' that suspends its task by the immanently progressive substructure it pre-supposes.

<sup>23</sup> See sub-section '*Constellation versus sublation*' in chapter 4, and in particular the reference to Simon Jarvis's reading of Adorno's 'speculative differentiations'.

<sup>24</sup> 'Where no aims are immediately given, the structures that the spirit in the process of becoming human finds amongst men as the scene and substrate of its activity lose their evident rootedness in supra-personal ideal necessities; they are simply existent, perhaps powerful, perhaps frail, but they



extremes. In *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Benjamin provides for Adorno another account of this extreme dialectical mediation of nature and history, but in reverse, as it were; through the interpretation of the allegorical poetry of the German Baroque as the experience of nature as history.<sup>25</sup> Allegory is differentiated from symbol here, according to the natural insistence of the historical presentation of ideas. This emerges from the expressive or mimetic relation that allegories establish between their concept or idea and their form; in contrast to symbols, in which the mimetic quality of the sign is a direct obstacle to its symbolic capacity, tying it down to the content of a form that is incidental to its meaning. Allegories are understood to create meaning through images in which meaning and form are deeply entwined in an expressive or mimetic relation to nature. Allegories therefore involve an insistence on the particularity of their expression that is absent from the symbols which appear in nature but are not subject to nature. <sup>A symbol's</sup> 'historical' existence is therefore only the fleeting appearance of the eternal, which remains fundamentally transcendent of its natural manifestation. As allegories, ideas lose their symbolic transcendence of nature and their historical appearance becomes subject to a history of nature. Images of death and destruction

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neither carry the consecration of the absolute nor are they the natural containers for the overflowing inwardness of the world. They form the world of convention, a world from whose all-embracing power only the innermost recesses of the soul are safe; a world that is present everywhere in boundless multiplicity and whose strict lawfulness, both in becoming and in being, is necessarily evident to the cognizant subject. But for all its lawfulness this world supplies neither a meaning for the subject in search of a goal nor a sensuous immediacy as material for the acting subject. This world is a second nature; like the first' – [Adorno adds at this point] 'first nature' for Lukács is likewise alienated nature, nature in the sense of the natural sciences – 'it can only be defined as the embodiment of well-known yet meaningless necessities and therefore it is ungraspable and unknowable in its actual substance.' Adorno 'The Idea of Natural History', pp.117-8.

See Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, trans A.Bostock (Merlin Press, London, 1978) p.62.

<sup>25</sup> 'In nature the allegorical poets saw eternal transience, and here alone did the saturnine vision of these generations recognise history.' Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p.179.

Translation altered.

are not merely symbols of an eternity that persists indifferently to the passing of time. They take up a melancholic insistence on the particularity of their naturalness, as an experience of their finitude, their immanence to historical existence.<sup>26</sup>

### Historical metaphysics

Benjamin's account of natural history is decisive for Adorno's concept of philosophy's time-consciousness as a form of secularisation; particularly as a finite exposition of ideas and therefore a secular exposition of metaphysics. As Benjamin remarks, the 'heart of the allegorical vision' is the 'secular exposition of history as the passion of the world.'<sup>27</sup>

Benjamin's account of allegory interprets its imagistic or mimetic insistence on the particularity of its form as the problem of a profane or secular appearance of ideas.

Allegories are therefore concepts or signs that achieve meaning through images in which nature is rendered historical.<sup>28</sup> They generate meaning through the signification of nature as

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<sup>26</sup> 'The relationship of symbol and allegory may be incisively and formally determined by means of the decisive category of time, whose introduction into this sphere of semiotics was the great romantic insight of these thinkers. Whereas in the symbol, with the glorification of death and destruction, the transfigured face of nature reveals itself fleetingly in the light of redemption, in allegory the observer is faced with a *facies hippocratica* of history, a petrified primordial landscape. Everything about history that, from the beginning, has been untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful, is expressed in a face – or rather a death's head. And although such a thing lacks all 'symbolic' freedom of expression, all classical proportion, all that is human, nevertheless not only the nature of human existence in general but the biographical historicity of an individual is enunciated in this figure of the most extreme subjugation to nature, in the form of a riddle.' Ibid. p.166.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. p.166.

<sup>28</sup> 'Benjamin shows that allegory is no composite of merely adventitious elements; the allegorical is not an accidental sign for an underlying content. Rather there is a specific relation between allegory and the allegorically meant, 'allegory is expression'. Allegory is usually taken to mean the presentation of a concept as an image and therefore it is labelled abstract and accidental. The relationship of allegory to its meaning is not accidental signification, but the playing out of a



history, but without that signification dissolving its naturalness altogether, as in the symbol. Adorno perceives in this allegorical vision a secular or finite critique of idealism. This proceeds through interpreting idealism as a decaying practice of symbolisation, where its transcendent signs have become allegories subject to a finite insistence, which destroys their claim to be transcendent from the profane course of history.<sup>29</sup> But Adorno's reception of Benjamin is critical. For the early Benjamin the task of both philosophical presentation and philosophical history is to preserve symbols from decaying in profane time; to reveal, preserve and renew the timeless, pre-given character of ideas from their reduction to their finite historical appearance.<sup>30</sup> The interpretation of allegories is therefore the attempt to recover the transcendence of ideas from their decayed, finite appearance within a profane history. That is, to recover their historical status as appearances of the eternal within the

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particularity; it is expression. What is expressed in the allegorical sphere is nothing but an historical relationship. The theme of the allegorical is, simply, history. At issue is an historical relationship between what appears – nature – and its meaning, i.e. transience.'

Adorno, 'The Idea of Natural History', p.119.

<sup>29</sup> '...natural history still remains the canon of interpretation for philosopher's of history: 'When, as is the case in the German play of mourning, history comes onto the scene, it does so as a cipher to be read. 'History' is writ across the countenance of nature in the sign language [*Zeichenschrift*] of transience. The allegorical physiognomy of nature's history, brought to the stage by the mourning play, is really present as a ruin.' This is the transmutation of metaphysics into history. It secularises metaphysics in the secular category pure and simple, the category of decay. Philosophy interprets that sign language, the ever new Menetekel, in the smallest, in the fragments which decay has chipped, and which bear objective meanings. No recollection of transcendence is possible any more, save by way of perdition; eternity appears, not as such, but diffracted through the most perishable.'

Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, p.353/Translation pp.359-60.

<sup>30</sup> 'The idea is something linguistic, it is that element of the symbolic in the essence of the word. In empirical perception, in which words have become fragmented, they possess, in addition to their more or less hidden, symbolic aspect, an obvious profane meaning. It is the task of the philosopher to restore, by representation the primacy of the symbolic character of the word, in which the idea is given self-consciousness...' Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p.36.

finite. Adorno's reception of Benjamin attempts to radicalise this historical account of the appearance of ideas, to the point where their transhistorical existence is finally destroyed. However, Adorno does not thereby attempt to destroy the possibility of metaphysics, as the presentation of ideas as the ultimate conditions of finitude. But in order to prevent ideas assuming a transhistorical existence they can only emerge through their fundamental mediation by finite history, as the very limits of finite history; that is, at the point at which finitude reveals its limits. Ideas can therefore only be presented in finitude negatively. This negative thinking of ideas is something Adorno derives from Hegel and this constitutes what may be called Adorno's Hegelian critique of Benjamin. However, Adorno's Hegelianism is simultaneously inflected by a Benjaminian critique of Hegel.<sup>31</sup> Hegel's philosophical time-consciousness is in many ways a classic instance of a symbolic rather than an allegorical history of ideas. The progressive substructure of Hegel's history of ideas interprets their finite appearance within an epoch, as the appearance of an eternal truth that persists transcendentally to the particularity of that finitude. Philosophy for Hegel, as for Benjamin, consists in the renewal of the eternal status of truth from its profane existence. However, it is ironically in Benjamin's apparently more Platonic insistence on the pre-given, timeless, and interruptive character of ideas that Adorno discerns a critique of Hegel. Adorno sees in the non-progressive, constellatory presentation of ideas in Benjamin, a departure from the idealistic substructure of Hegel's immanently progressive continuum of truth. This introduces a disruptive thinking of ideas that is able to subject itself to the disruptive quality of a radical historicisation of ideas; that is, the non-pre-given and non-timeless quality of ideas. Adorno therefore presents a peculiar, simultaneous criticism of Benjamin and Hegel, the product of which is an ultimately historical conception of ideas. Adorno suspends the timeless quality of

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<sup>31</sup> For Adorno's inflection of Hegel and Benjamin in terms of the problem of philosophical presentation see sub-sections '*Ideas*' and '*Constellation versus sublation*'.



ideas in Benjamin by insisting on their radically finite presentation, which he derives from the negative thinking of the absolute in Hegel's dialectics. Conversely, he suspends the timeless quality of Hegel's progressive substructure of truth, through insisting on the non-progressive, constellatory presentation of ideas, derived from Benjamin. Adorno both combines and transforms Benjamin's and Hegel's philosophy of history, in order to develop a radically negative and disruptive presentation of ideas, subject to a finite history. Ideas only emerge at the very limits of this finitude, at the point at which its limits reveal an infinity. This is not an infinity that can be established as a pre-given or persisting order. It only emerges through the extreme mediation of a finite history, at the points at which that finite history breaks down and reveals its seams or limits. Rather than a history of metaphysics, Adorno introduces an historical metaphysics.

### **Absolute modernity and dialectical mourning**

Adorno's attempt to forge philosophy as the thought of its time invokes two apparently opposed, but in actuality, deeply inflected forms of time consciousness: 'absolute modernity' and 'dialectical mourning'. In the face of philosophy's obsolescence as a transhistorical order of truth, its claim to be the most progressive expression of truth becomes fundamentally questionable. The task of critically recovering the role Hegel had outlined for philosophy becomes fundamentally problematic once philosophy can no longer assume that it is the spiritual expression of an immanently progressive development of reason. It becomes an anxious exertion conducted without guarantees. Philosophy should be capable of thinking the present in its novelty, both in order to be open to the possibility of apprehending a new future in its disjuncture with the past, and thereby, to free itself from traditionalism: '...philosophy must prove itself the most advanced consciousness – permeated with the potential of what could be different – but also a match for the power of regression, which it can transcend only

after having incorporated and comprehended it.’<sup>32</sup> Philosophy must therefore become absolutely modern:

Rimbaud’s ‘*il faut être absolument moderne*’ is neither an aesthetic programme nor a programme for aesthetes: it is a categorical imperative of philosophy. Whatever wants nothing to do with the trajectory of history belongs all the more truly to it. History promises no salvation and offers the possibility of hope only to the concept whose movement follows history’s path to the very extreme.<sup>33</sup>

Adorno’s appropriation of Rimbaud’s imperative announces a philosophical modernism that is not just an aesthetic experience, but a philosophical experience.<sup>34</sup> This formulation should be considered carefully. It is an imperative ‘of’ philosophy and therefore fundamentally constitutive of it, not just an aspect of it. As ‘absolute’, it demands a totalisation of the modern. However, ‘absolute’ also indicates the extreme or exaggerated quality of the modern or the new, as an excessive horizon. This is confirmed by the description of it as a ‘categorical imperative’; namely, an ‘ought’ imposed despite the limits of the ability to realise this totality. This Kantian qualification indicates Adorno’s departure from Hegel’s claim to present the totality of time.<sup>35</sup> The totalisation of time, its absoluteness, remains an

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<sup>32</sup> Adorno, ‘Why Still Philosophy?’ p.16.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. p.17.

<sup>34</sup> See sub-section ‘*Modernism*’ in chapter 1.

<sup>35</sup> Hegel’s definition of philosophy as the thought of its time is motivated directly in order to differentiate it from the concept of an ought: ‘...philosophy...is *its own time comprehended in thoughts*. It is just as foolish to imagine that any philosophy can transcend its contemporary world as that an individual can overleap his own time or leap over Rhodes. If his theory does indeed transcend his own time, if it builds itself a world *as it ought to be*, then it certainly has an existence, but only within his opinions...’ Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, pp.21-2.

However, Adorno’s appeal to Kant is equally problematic if it is meant to imply the autonomous determination of the will intended by Kant: ‘Imperatives determine either the conditions of causality of a rational being as an efficient cause only in respect to its effect and its sufficiency to



excessive, exaggerated injunction that cannot be presented adequately, but only negatively as a task. Absolute modernity reveals itself to be a philosophical idea associated with the idea of natural history. If the modern is to be genuinely new, it must disrupt the present and therefore distinguish itself from a 'new' that is merely the extension of the present and which is, in that sense, not new but part of an already established present. The genuinely new must distinguish itself from the mythic continuum of the existing order, which thereby presents itself as nature. Its break must be absolute in this sense. Conversely, as this break into an absolutely new future, this novelty makes a claim to a new absolute, which indicates an immanent context like the present and therefore not new. The extremity of historical novelty presents itself as pre-given and natural.

The 'Dedication' to Max Horkheimer that provides the prefatory pages to *Minima Moralia* characterises the book as emerging from a 'mournful science' [*traurige Wissenschaft*], in such a way that the correspondence of this 'science' to philosophy as such, is evident:

The mournful science from which I make this offering to my friend relates to a region that from time immemorial was regarded as the true field of philosophy, but which, since the latter's conversion into method, has lapsed into intellectual neglect, sententious whimsy and finally oblivion: the teaching of the good life.<sup>36</sup>

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bring this effect about, or they determine only the will, whether it be adequate to the effect or not. In the former case, imperatives would be hypothetical and would contain only precepts of skill; in the latter, on the contrary, they would be categorical and would alone be practical laws.'

Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. L.W.Beck (Macmillan, New York, 1993), p.18.

<sup>36</sup> ~~Adorno~~ <sup>Theodor</sup> W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia* GS Bd. 4 (Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1951, 1997), p.13. Translated by E.F.N. Jephcott in *Minima Moralia* (NLB, 1974; Verso, London, 1978) p.15. Jephcott translates *traurige* as melancholy. I have altered this to mourning in order to make evident the, presumably intentional, correlation to Benjamin's *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*.

As this quotation indicates, Adorno does not propose a simple relation of identity between mournful science and traditional philosophy. But neither is the significance of mournful science reduced to a regionally moral or ethical dimension of philosophy. *Minima Moralia's* diminutive allusion to Aristotle's *Magma Moralia* is not contented. Insofar as the neglect of 'the teaching of the good life' is a consequence of the general disintegration of philosophy, its reconsideration involves a reconsideration of philosophy in its decayed traditional form, as something not reducible to method. The meaning of the term 'mournful science' is therefore inflected by the general fate of philosophy. It is not a mournful region of philosophy, nor does it mourn a region of philosophy. It mourns philosophy as something more than what its regionalisation as method has made of it. Mournful science does not propose a complete recovery of philosophy as it once was. Philosophy becomes mournful due to the recognition that its traditional form has been lost. Philosophy lives on through internalising this recognition within its concept of itself. It is re-constituted as constitutively mournful. Philosophy is not mourned. Philosophy becomes mournful.

Adorno's elaboration of the concept of mourning is developed, most explicitly perhaps, in his early *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*.<sup>37</sup> This displays his deep debt to Benjamin's work, particularly *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. Adorno's account of mourning here is developed through an interpretation of the *intérieur* in Kierkegaard. Mourning is apprehended here as the experience of the development of interiority as a refuge from the loss of the exterior historical context of the truth of the biblical scriptures. Mourning registers this loss and thereby attempts to retain their truth. Adorno's critique of Kierkegaard, and his development of the concept of mourning, emerges through what he describes as

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<sup>37</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Kierkegaard, Konstruktion des Asthetischen* GS Bd.2 (Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1962); translated by R.Hullot-Kentor, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, London, 1989).



‘dialectical mourning’. Dialectical mourning differentiates itself from the desire for a literal recovery of what is lost. It involves recognising unrecoverable loss as the constitutive component of a mourning that is able to overcome loss without literal recovery:

Dialectical mourning [*Schwermut*] does not mourn [*trauert*] vanished happiness. It knows that it is unreachable. But it also knows of the promise that conjoins the unreachable, precisely in its origin, with the wish: ‘Never have I been happy; and yet it has always seemed as if happiness were in my train, as if glad genii danced about me, invisible to others but not to me, whose eyes gleamed with joy...’ For the true desire of mourning [*Schwermut*] is nourished on the idea of an eternal happiness without sacrifice, which it still could never adequately indicate as its object. Although the wish that follows this aim is unfulfillable and yet full of hope, it originates in its aim, and just as it circles around happiness, the wish circles, fulfilled, in happiness itself.<sup>38</sup>

In dialectical mourning the literal desire for an eternal happiness becomes the finite recognition of the ungraspability of the infinite, but not just as a loss. This recognition of ungraspability is produced by the desire for the ideal, but, in itself, it is distinguished from that desire for the presence of the ideal by the fact that this ideal is only ‘present’ to this mourning as an absence. This mourning, once it becomes dialectical, or self-conscious of itself, reveals a transformation of the lost ideal into a finite experience of its loss. The unhappiness at the loss of the ideal discovers, in self-consciousness, that its mourned ideal is in fact present to it as an absence. This presence reveals, in mourning eternal happiness, a finite happiness. The forms through which this finitude is experienced become allegory and semblance, insofar as both present a fundamentally ambiguous form of the appearance of the ideal as the real, and the real as ideal. As forms of dialectical mourning, allegory and

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid. pp.179-80./Translation p.126.

semblance are not reducible to either the real or the ideal. They are experienced in their constitutively ambiguous speculative form, as finite transcendence.

### *Mourning and melancholia*

Adorno's employment of the concept of dialectical mourning invokes certain similarities with Freud's distinction between mourning and melancholia.<sup>39</sup> Adorno does not directly cite or employ Freud's text, and does not appear to recognise its terminological distinction.

However, the question remains as to whether Adorno's concept of dialectical mourning is nonetheless subject to it. Freud's distinction is based on the presence of unconscious motivation in melancholia and its absence in mourning. Mourning is understood as a self-reflective or internal working through of loss which is economically oriented towards coming to terms with the absence of the lost object. Melancholia is differentiated by the extent to which this internal working through of loss is combined with an inhibition of the ego and self-disregard that is not directly explainable by the loss of the object and thereby indicates unconscious motivation:

...melancholia is in some way related to an object-loss which is withdrawn from consciousness, in contradistinction to mourning, in which there is nothing about the loss that is unconscious. In mourning we found that the inhibition and loss of interest are fully accounted for by the work of mourning in which the ego is absorbed. In melancholia, the unknown loss will result in a similar internal work and will therefore be responsible for the melancholic inhibition. The difference is that the inhibition of the melancholic seems puzzling to us because we cannot see what it is that is

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<sup>39</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Trauer und Melancholie' (1917), translated by J. Strachey as 'Mourning and Melancholia', *On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis*, The Penguin Freud Library, vol. 11. (Penguin, London New York, 1991), pp. 245-68.



absorbing him so entirely. The melancholic displays something else besides which is lacking in mourning – an extraordinary diminution in his self-regard, an impoverishment of his ego on a grand scale. In mourning it is the world which had become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself.<sup>40</sup>

Self-abasement is explained by the unconscious narcissism of the melancholic. That is, by the extent to which the melancholic's internal working through of loss, unconsciously mis-identifies his or her own ego as the object of loss that it must come to terms with losing. Suicidal desires are explained by the extent to which the melancholic is able to objectify themselves sufficiently that their experience of loss is able to overcome self-preservation.

A question that Freud's differentiation generates for the interpretation of Adorno is therefore: how does dialectical mourning correspond to the distinction between mourning and melancholia? Ostensibly it corresponds quite precisely to Freud's characterisation of mourning. Dialectical mourning presents a working through of irrecoverable loss and the dissolution of the compulsive attachment to (in the case of Kierkegaard) the *intérieur*, which corresponds closely to the unconscious narcissism diagnosed by Freud. Adorno's interpretation can be understood as an act of mourning itself. It distinguishes the lost object, eternal happiness, from its internalisation and mis-identification with the *intérieur*, and reconfigures that internalisation as a working through of the loss of that object in a secular world, in a finite happiness. However, drawing this comparison also reveals a certain disjuncture between Freud's concept of mourning and Adorno's concept of dialectical mourning, as one might expect from the very different nature of the lost objects being considered. Freud's account of successful mourning understands it as coming to terms with

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid. p.254.

the reality principle or 'reality-testing'.<sup>41</sup> This differentiates it from dialectical mourning, which does not merely come to terms with reality, or, only does so through a transformation of that experience of loss into a new experience at odds with 'reality'; an experience that is mediated fundamentally by reality but not purely immanent to it. Adorno's dialectical mourning of transcendent ideas generates a new experience of finite transcendence, through the self-conscious semblance that the lost object assumes. Dialectical mourning is therefore not fully 'successful', in Freud's terms, and retains a quasi-melancholic refusal to come to terms with reality.

This suggests an interpretation of Adorno's philosophy as unconsciously narcissistic. Habermas has judged Adorno to have provided a late, dark manifestation of bourgeois philosophy, which might be paraphrased as a kind of melancholia.<sup>42</sup> This would suggest that Adorno's self-negating philosophy presents a melancholic working through of philosophy's monological form, that ostensibly attempts to mourn the loss of traditional metaphysics, but which is inhibited by an unconscious attachment to that lost object, an attachment that prevents him from moving on to the new paradigm of communicative reason, and persisting in an internalised self-abasement, extended to the challenge to self-preservation. The

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<sup>41</sup> 'In what, now, does the work which mourning performs consist? I do not think there is anything far-fetched in presenting it in the following way. Reality-testing has shown that the loved object no longer exists, and it proceeds to demand that all libido shall be withdrawn from its attachments to that object. This demand arouses understandable opposition – it is a matter of general observation that people never willingly abandon a libidinal position, not even, indeed, when a substitute is already beckoning to them... Why this compromise by which the command of reality is carried out piecemeal should be so extraordinarily painful is not at all easy to explain in terms of economics. It is remarkable that this painful unpleasure is taken as a matter of course by us. The fact is, however, that when the work of mourning is completed the ego becomes free and uninhibited again.' Ibid. 253.

<sup>42</sup> An notable instance is Jürgen Habermas, 'Theodor Adorno: The Primal History of Subjectivity – Self-Affirmation Gone Wild' (1969), in *Philosophical-Political Profiles*, trans. F.G. Lawrence (MIT Press, Cambridge Ma., 1983).



resonance of this diagnosis is due not only to its promise as a critique of the unconscious motivation of Adorno's philosophy, but more deeply perhaps, insofar as it mis-recognises Adorno's dialectical mourning as a bringing to self-consciousness of the semblance character of metaphysics in a transformative experience of finite transcendence, not as merely a coming to terms with reality or the paradigm of communicative reason, but as a dialectical mourning through which a transformed metaphysical experience is generated through the recognition of the self-conscious semblance that traditional metaphysics has generated. Adorno's critique of philosophy is conducted expressly against the philosophical narcissism of autonomous, self-sufficient, systematic philosophy.<sup>43</sup> Adorno explicitly presents philosophy, in analogy to Freud's psychoanalysis, as a form of critique that attempts to bring to consciousness the repressed historical motivations within the most abstract philosophies as they emerge through an experience of loss and disintegration:

Even the decaying concepts of epistemology point beyond themselves. Right up to their highest formalisms and, before that, in their miscarriages, they are to be rescued as a bit of consciousness historiography [*bewusstloser Geschichtschreibung*]. For they must be helped to procure self-consciousness against what they explicitly mean. This salvation, mindful of the suffering that sedimented itself in concepts, waits for the moment of their ruin. It is the idea of philosophical critique. It has no other measure than the ruin of illusion.<sup>44</sup>

As they decay, the meaning of the most abstract philosophical ideas, lose their force or self-evidence, and reveal particular historical attachments that betray their transhistorical claim.

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<sup>43</sup> At points Adorno is explicit about this narcissistic character of philosophy as a problem to be criticised. See Adorno, *Philosophische Terminologie* vol.1, pp.204-5.

<sup>44</sup> Adorno, *Zur Metakritik der Erkenntnistheorie*, p.47/Translation p.39.

These ideas are not to be simply abandoned or forgotten. Their loss is to be worked through in order to bring out their repressed historical motivation.

The English mistranslation of *bewusstloser* as 'unconscious' rather than 'consciousless', raises a problem for the Freudian intimations of Adorno's philosophical historiography here. Freud distinguishes the 'unconscious' from other apparent synonyms such as the 'foreconscious', insofar as the unconscious concerns drives that are not just latent within consciousness and that can be more or less straightforwardly brought to consciousness; but drives that are actively repressed and are not brought to consciousness however hard one might try.<sup>45</sup> The unconscious certainly does not concern something outside or external to consciousness. This is significant in terms of Adorno's critique of the idealism of Hegel's philosophical time-consciousness as the consciousness of a continuous substructure of truth. There is a fundamental correlation between a Freudian history of the unconscious and an Hegelian history of spirit insofar as both would treat history as a, more or less presentable, immanent context of consciousness or spirit. To treat history like the unconscious would fundamentally limit the extent and manner in which it could be presented, but however dark, obscure and dystopian this consciousness may be, it still presents an immanent substructure that is common to the presupposition of spirit. Conversely, if Adorno's emphasis on the discontinuity of history is not to collapse into an absurd separation of distinct phases, he needs to be able to present the continuity of history, even if this is only

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<sup>45</sup> 'We were accustomed to think that every latent idea was so because it was weak and that it grew conscious as soon as it became strong. We have now gained the conviction that there are some latent ideas which do not penetrate into consciousness, however strong that may have become. Therefore we may call latent ideas of the first type *foreconscious*, while we reserve the term *unconscious* [*Unbewusst*] (proper) for the latter type which we came to study in neuroses.' Sigmund Freud, 'A Note on the Unconscious in Psychoanalysis', *On Metapsychology*, pp.52-3.



perceptible retrospectively. This problem would qualify the assumption of historiography on the model of the interpretation of the unconscious.

*Symptomatic reading of truth*

Adorno's conception of philosophy and Freud's psychoanalysis are both characterised fundamentally by the examination of an object that is only presentable negatively. This affinity is apparent in the comparison of Freud's interpretation of the unconscious in the 'dream-work' and Adorno's interpretation of ideas in dialectical mourning. Freud describes dream-work as requiring a peculiar form of interpretation, partly speculative and partly empirical and thereby neither.<sup>46</sup> The unconscious is not without 'empirical' effects. These are derived from the analysis and comparison of the manifest and latent content of the dream (i.e. the explicit content of the dream and the implicit events the dream relates to in the dreamers conscious life). However, the unconscious is only revealed symptomatically through these contents, as that concealed determination which effects the transformation of latent into manifest content. The unconscious is therefore interpreted through a symptomatic reading. Adorno's concept of philosophical critique can be regarded as functioning analogously. It analyses an idea at first immanently, in its self-determination, analogously to the interpretation of the manifest content of a dream. The critique of its ideality is then developed through the analysis of its historical and empirical attachments as they become clear from its breakdown or decay as an ideology. The truth of the idea is not however reduced to these empirical attachments. They function analogously to the establishment of the latent content of a dream, insofar as they indicate the raw material of ideas, but do not explain why the ideas

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<sup>46</sup> 'And here is the opportunity to learn what we could not have guessed from speculation, or from another source of empirical information – that the laws of unconscious activity differ widely from those of the conscious.' Ibid. p.56.

are the way they are and what the ideas reveal in their ideality. That is, they do not fully explain what is repressed by them. This only emerges through establishing what has taken place in this conversion, analogously to Freud's interpretation of the dream-work. Thus, the critique of philosophical idealism is proposed in terms of its repressed truth, which involves establishing what has taken place in the transformation of the latent, empirical content of ideas and their manifest content. Philosophical critique is oriented towards the truth as the consciousnessless history that is repressed in this exchange. It seeks to reveal truth, like the revealing of the unconscious, as a negative determination of this transformation; a determination that, like the unconscious, does not present itself immediately or positively, but only negatively in the contradiction or transformation of manifest and latent content. Philosophical critique would therefore proceed by a kind of symptomatic reading of the simultaneously ideal and empirical dimensions of ideas, as an interpretation of their truth. This presents a symptomatic reading of truth.<sup>47</sup>

### **Ideology-critique**

Adorno's concept of philosophy as a critical form of secular time-consciousness generates a concept of ideology-critique. The historical materialistic critique of philosophy's idealism proposed by Marx's critique of ideology, which had appeared to ruin philosophy as an obsolete theoretical discipline, leads to self-contradiction if it cannot re-establish a claim to

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<sup>47</sup> This would be fundamentally distinct from the exposition of symptomatic reading that Althusser proposed in relation to Marx's philosophy. (See Louis Althusser, 'From *Capital* to Marx's Philosophy' in Louis Althusser and Etienne Balibar, *Reading Capital* trans. B.Brewster (New Left Books, London, 1970), pp.11-71.) For Althusser, the 'unconscious' of this symptomatic reading is quite unproblematically presentable in correct sciences or correct theoretical knowledges. For Adorno, however, it is a consequence of his critique of idealism (to which Althusser would be subject) that ideas, as the presentation of truth, are only presentable negatively. Adorno's philosophy is in this sense closer to the model of Freud's psychoanalysis than Althusser.



truth. Adorno diagnoses this self-contradiction in Mannheim's sociology of knowledge and proposes as an antidote the recovery of philosophy as an emphatic claim to truth, but now fundamentally inflected with the critique of ideology as its own task.<sup>48</sup> Philosophy and the critique of ideology are therefore both critically redeemed and transformed through their extreme mediation, with the critique of ideology rendered philosophical and philosophy rendered the critique of ideology.<sup>49</sup> This is evident in Adorno's frequent reference to ideology as a 'socially necessary semblance'.<sup>50</sup> This phrase reflects the extent to which ideology is not reducible to a crude concept of false consciousness, for which ideology can be simply

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<sup>48</sup> 'The task of ideology-critique is to judge the subjective and objective shares and their dynamics. It is to deny the false objectivity of concept fetishism by reducing it to the social subject, and to deny false subjectivity, the sometimes unrecognisably veiled claim that all being lies in the mind, by showing it up as a fraud, a parasitical nonentity, as well as demonstrating its immanent hostility to the mind. The 'all' of the indiscriminately total concept of ideology, however, terminates in nothingness. Once it has ceased to differ from any true consciousness it is no longer fit too criticize a false one. In the idea of objective truth, materialist dialectics necessarily turns philosophical – despite, and because of, all its criticisms of philosophy.' Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, p.198/Translation pp.197-8. The reference to a total concept of ideology refers primarily Mannheim. See Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge*(1929) trans. L.Wirth and E.Shils (Routledge, New York, London, 1936).

<sup>49</sup> 'The ideological side of thinking shows in its permanent failure to make good on the claim that the non-I is finally the I: the more the I thinks, the more perfectly will it find itself debased into an object. Identity becomes the authority for a doctrine of adjustment, in which the object – which the subject is supposed to go by – repays the subject for what the subject has done to it. The subject is to see reason against its reason. The critique of ideology is thus not something peripheral and intra-scientific, not something limited to the objective mind and to the products of subjective limitation, but is philosophically central: the critique of constitutive consciousness itself.' Ibid. p151/Translation p.148.

<sup>50</sup> '...der gesellschaftlich notwendige Schein...' Theodor W.Adorno, 'Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft'(1967) GS Bd.10.1 (Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt an Main, 1977), p.26. Translated by S.Weber and S.Weber as 'Cultural Criticism and Society' in *Prisms* (MIT Press, Cambridge Ma., 1984), p.26.

discarded as it is recognised. For Adorno, following Marx, ideology has a social reality.<sup>51</sup> It is demanded by society and through this demand reflects the nature of society. It is not merely a delusion. This characterisation of ideology also indicates that Adorno understands ideology as a Marxist transformation of the transhistorical form of Kantian dialectics: Kant's necessary illusion is therefore transformed, via Marxian sociology, into socially necessary illusion. This reveals the critique of constitutive subjectivity developed by Kant's dialectic, to be at the heart of Marx's critique of capitalism. Marx's sociology thereby enables the interpretation of idealist philosophy as the consciousnessless historiography of the development of capitalism and the forms of subjectivity it generates, which is brought to consciousness by a philosophically infused critique of ideology. This reveals the truth repressed in the development of transcendental subjectivity: that its 'abstractness' describes the actuality of the abstract forms of experience within capitalism far more authentically than the 'concreteness' of a materialist psychology of individuals.<sup>52</sup> But the interpretation of the entwinement of truth and illusion in ideology is not intended as a more forgiving account of ideology, which would suspend its

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<sup>51</sup> See Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology*, Collected Works vol.5 (Lawrence and Wishart, Progress Publishers, Moscow, London, 1976), pp.28-31.

<sup>52</sup> 'In a certain sense, although idealism would be the last to admit it, the transcendental subject is more real, that is, it far more determines the real conduct of people and society than do those psychological individuals from whom the transcendental subject was abstracted and who have little to say in the world; for their part they have turned into appendages of the social machinery, ultimately into ideology. The living individual person, such as he is constrained to act and for which he was even internally molded, is as *homo oeconomicus* incarnate closer to the transcendental subject than the living individual he must immediately take himself to be. To this extent idealist theory was realistic and need not feel embarrassed when reproached for idealism by its opponents. The doctrine of the transcendental subject faithfully discloses the precedence of the abstract, rational relations that are abstracted from individuals and their conditions and for which exchange is the model. If the standard structure of society is the exchange form, its rationality constitutes people: what they are for themselves, what they think they are, is secondary. Adorno, 'Subject and Object', *Critical Models* p.248.



relation to truth; it elaborates the extent to which ideology is fundamental to critique, not just in terms of its social reality, but in terms of the criticism enabled by its very illusoriness.

Ideology-critique is therefore not just the external critique of ideology in the name of a truth that philosophy guards. Rather critique and ideology are, as they are for Kant's dialectic, bound up with one another. The illusions of society are not only necessary or natural to that society, but reveal claims to transcendence which enable a critique of that society. Ideology-critique is therefore revealed to have the same logical structure as negative dialectics.

Ideology-critique is an idea, according to Adorno's riddle-like characterisation. It emerges through a crisis of knowledge – the problem of a critique of ideology in terms of truth – and reveals this problem to present a solution, when the concept of ideology is considered not just as an illusion, or an illusion with some degree of social actuality, but rather central to a critique of truth. Furthermore, this is not effected through a transcendental method of critique, but through an analysis of the history of the concept.

Adorno's assumption of ideology-critique as a form of critical time-consciousness is apparent in his critical self-reflection on the concept of ideology itself, which he accuses of being subject to an ironic de-historicisation. Despite being ostensibly committed to the historical criticism of social illusions, it does not tend to consider itself historically. This failure of critical, historical self-reflection leads to it becoming an ideology itself. Adorno therefore proposes a specification of the historical character of ideology:

As the objectively necessary and simultaneously false consciousness, as the crossing [*Verschränkung*] of truth and untruth, which distinguishes itself from the full truth as well as from a bare lie, ideology belongs, if not only to the modern, then in any case to an emerging urban market economy. For *ideology is justification*. It requires on the hand, the experience of an already problematic social situation, which it is necessary to defend, and on the other hand, the idea of justice itself, without which such an

apologetic necessity would not stand up and which has its model in the exchange of equivalents. Where only unmediated power relations dominate, there are essentially no ideologies [*gibt es eigentlich keine Ideologien*].<sup>53</sup>

Having made this emphatic definition of ideology, Adorno then goes on to claim, firstly, that fascist propaganda cannot be properly understood under this classical characterization of ideology, since it depended on the spectre of violence for its legitimating effect; and secondly, that ideology is not applicable to late capitalist societies in its classical form, since these societies no longer gain their legitimacy through ideals. Neither do they function through the direct threat of violence as with fascism. Rather, Adorno's claim is that late capitalist societies are fundamentally nominalistic with regard to ideals and garner social discipline and legitimacy through the culture industry. Adorno's account of the destruction of the classical concept of ideology seems to imply an 'end of ideology' thesis. However, despite Adorno's claim that the classic form of ideology no longer applies to late capitalism, he also describes a fundamental transformation in the ideological self-legitimation of late or monopoly capitalism:

If one wanted to condense into one proposition what the ideology of mass culture essentially churns out one must present it as a parody of the proposition, "Become what you are": as the increasing replication [*Verdoppelung*] and justification of what is anyway the persisting situation encompassing all transcendence and all critique.<sup>54</sup>

Adorno's argument is that the transformation of ideology – from its classical liberal capitalist form to its late or monopoly capitalist form – is a move from the production of legitimating ideas to the nominalistic critique of ideas, in the generation of a pseudo-realism from which

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<sup>53</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, 'Beitrag zur Ideologienlehre' GS.Bd. 8, p.465.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. p.476.



all aspects of transcendence and critique are excluded. This produces what Adorno at one point refers to as a 'beliefless belief' in the existing situation: '...it is fundamental to ideology that it is never fully believed and that it advances from self-disdain to self-destruction.'<sup>55</sup> It is the defining function of the culture industry to sustain social discipline without recourse to an explicitly ideational ideology.

### *Art as Ideology-critique*

Due to the diagnosis of monopoly capitalism as resting on an ideology of immanence, ideologies of transcendence take on an ironically critical role, insofar as they interrupt the semblance of immanence; the illusion that there is no future that could depart radically from the present. This critical function of ideology is central to Adorno's account of art as ideology.<sup>56</sup> The point here is not that artworks are partly ideological and partly have truth content – i.e., to the extent that they are not identical with the pure concept of art – but that the artwork's masking of truth, their semblance character, has precisely the character of the decayed idea of ideology as an entwinement of truth and untruth. In the context of Adorno's account of the ideologyless ideology of the culture industry, it becomes clear that the semblance character of the artwork's claim to truth has the peculiar function of providing a

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<sup>55</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p.235.

'The triumph of advertising in the culture industry is that consumers feel compelled to buy and use its products even though they see through them.'

Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p.168.

<sup>56</sup> 'In formal terms, independent of what they say, they [artworks] are ideology in that a priori they posit something spiritual as being independent from the conditions of its material production and therefore as being intrinsically superior and beyond the primordial guilt of the separation of physical and spiritual labour.' Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p.227.

refuge for an experience of the limits of a highly secularised capitalism.<sup>57</sup> True to Adorno's understanding of dialectical mourning, the destruction of the idea of truth is transformed in the experience of the self-conscious semblance that is presented by artworks, as a new claim to truth. The self-insistence of the autonomous artwork presents the semblance of transcendence from a present conditioned by universal exchange or commodification. The artwork's independence from these conditions is a semblance, but the self-consciousness of that semblance prevents it from being simply misleading and provides an experience of the limits of this present and the intimation of a radically different future; a future in which things are not dominated by commodification. Artworks do not achieve this by their externality to the present, but by their immanently emerging anachronism. Adorno by no means understands artworks to be independent of commodification. They are commodities. Indeed, Adorno describes them as 'absolute commodities'.<sup>58</sup> But as absolute commodities they emphasise their fetish character to such an extent that they generate the semblance that they are not exchangeable. The uselessness of artworks presents the limits of commodification, which as Marx made clear takes place through the exchange of use-values.<sup>59</sup> The artwork, as an absolute commodity, presents the immanent radicalisation of commodification to the point at which its limits are exposed and the semblance of something beyond its conditions is perceptible, if only as a semblance. Through their dialectical mourning of truth as a

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<sup>57</sup> 'Artworks are the plenipotentaries of things that are no longer distorted by exchange, profit, and the false needs of a degraded humanity. In the context of total semblance, art's semblance of being-in-itself is the mask of truth.' Ibid. p.227.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid. p.236.

<sup>59</sup> 'The truth content of artworks, which is indeed their social truth, is predicated on their fetish character. The principle of heteronomy, apparently the counterpart of fetishism, is the principle of exchange, and in it domination is masked. Only what does not submit to that principle acts as the plenipotentiary of what is free from domination; only what is useless can stand in for the stunted use value.' Ibid. p.227.



semblance, artworks effectively present a dialectical mourning of the idea of ideology-critique itself. The obsolescence of its classical form as ideals of justification reveals in the artwork a self-conscious semblance, in which the critique of the new ideologyless ideology of a present reveals an immanently emerging transcendence of the present, through which a critique of the present conditions of society can be experienced.

## Coda

**From postmetaphysical to metaphysical thinking**

Adorno's critique of metaphysics corresponds in many respects to that proposed by Habermas. And yet he comes to a different conclusion about the persistence of metaphysics within modernity. This difference is not incidental to the problem of Critical Theory. It is decisive. This can be synoptically shown if we assess Habermas's outline of postmetaphysical thinking in the light of Adorno's reflections on metaphysics.<sup>1</sup> Firstly, Habermas argues that the ontological discourse of metaphysics gives way to procedural rationality. It is clear that Adorno also departs from the project of ontology as the establishment of a total order of the real, whether that is transcendent or immanent to finite experience. However, the result of this is not simply a procedural rationality, which, he agrees with Habermas would be the end of philosophy.<sup>2</sup> Adorno's development of dialectics proposes a negative experience of the absolute that enables a critique of the established conditions of experience and the generation of an historical metaphysics beyond the claim to identity. Habermas displaces this programme without fully recognising it.

Secondly, Habermas proposes a linguistic turn to theoretical discourse, conceived as a turn from a philosophy of consciousness to intersubjective communication. Adorno also recognises the essentially linguistic form of philosophy, but sees it as the task of philosophy's language to generate experiences which are not reducible to its linguistic medium. Despite

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<sup>1</sup> The following refers to the 4 conditions of postmetaphysical thinking proposed by Habermas. See section 'Excursus: From metaphysics to postmetaphysical thinking' in chapter 1, above.

<sup>2</sup> 'Unless the idealistically acquired concept of dialectics harbours experiences contrary to the Hegelian emphasis, experiences independent of the idealistic machinery, philosophy must inevitably do without substantive insight, confine itself to the methodology of the sciences, call that philosophy, and virtually cross itself out.' Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, p.19/Translation pp.7-8.



the monological aspects of Adorno's interest in individual experience, there is no question that these experiences are understood as fundamentally social. Adorno's resistance to the move to a model of communication – which he does in fact anticipate – is due to the inherent subjectivism to which this would lead, naturalising the separation of subjectivity from nature through a second nature of the intersubjective lifeworld. Habermas and Adorno confront each other directly on this issue. Habermas explicitly abandons the task of philosophy as Adorno understands it, by simply disqualifying it as a problem. The claim to have shifted paradigm does not solve these problems, but simply displaces them.

Thirdly, Habermas describes the move to a situated reason, both with respect to practice and history. The historical form of truth is fundamental to Adorno's concept of metaphysics, following Benjamin.<sup>3</sup> Metaphysical experience is for Adorno an experience of time and is directly inflected by historical events. Conversely, Habermas's communicative theory structures itself in relation to an ideal communicative community which is projected outside of history. Habermas attempts to situate it historically in various ways, but this tends to conflict with its regulative function, which requires its ideality. Adorno's resistance to the fusion of theory and practice does not attempt to separate them, or deny that theory is itself a form of practice. The separation of theory from praxis is for Adorno an effect of the critical form of theory or philosophy; the extent to which philosophy's separateness enables a critique of practice. The consequence of Habermas's fusion of theory and practice has been to form an essentially reconstructive science of the pragmatics of language. The emancipatory dimension of praxis is dissolved by this project, thereby directly confronting rather than resolving Adorno's criticisms. Moreover, insofar as this emancipatory dimension is given

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<sup>3</sup> See sections 'Speculative philosophy: Benjamin' in chapter 5, and 'Historical metaphysics' in chapter 6.

over to the regulative function of a normative theory of communication, this reproduces the separation of theory and practice, and in a far more dualistic form.<sup>4</sup>

Fourthly, Habermas refers to the task of deflating the extra-ordinary. In a sense, Adorno also commits himself to this task, insofar as it is true of the project of secularisation, which requires the dissolution of an ideal ontology or theology. However, the problem of this task is the extent to which its deflation leads to an immanence, which is only a limited form of what is possible; that is, whether, for instance, secularisation leads to a blind anthropocentrism. The task of secularisation therefore requires a form of critical self-reflection through which it remains open to the limits of its sense of the possible. Transcendence of the immanence of the present, in order to subject it to criticism, is therefore crucial to secularisation if it is not to turn into a new form of ideology. This danger is precisely the reversion of enlightenment to myth described in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.<sup>5</sup> Adorno's philosophy proposes a critical self-reflection of enlightenment through the speculative experience of the limits of immanence. It does not propose a new ontology insofar as that would simply institute a new immanence, whether that is idealistically or materialistically conceived. It is insofar as science concerns essentially the establishment of an immanent account of what is, that Adorno distinguishes it from philosophy. Philosophy is therefore crucial to a Critical Theory of society. If the dissolution of transcendent powers from the immanence of society is not to become a new myth, a new ideology, the critique of society needs a critique that goes to the very heart of its principle of immanence; that is, a

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<sup>4</sup> 'Objective bourgeois spirit has risen up as the replacement of philosophy. One cannot fail to recognise in this the *parti pris* for the exchange principle, abstracted to the norm of being-for-another, with which the criterion of empathetic reconstructability and the concept of communication, ultimately formed in the culture industry, comply as the measure of all that is intellectual.' Adorno, 'Introduction' *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, p.57.

<sup>5</sup> See sections 'Metaphysical experience' in chapter 5 and 'Historical metaphysics' in chapter 6.



critique capable of questioning the fundamental form of society. Habermas's eagerness to deflate the extra-ordinary leads to a form of Critical Theory that constitutively excludes this form of critique. Habermas reduces emancipatory critique to the conditions confirmable by reconstructive sciences. This ties the claims of emancipation to established conditions of possibility, thereby strictly abandoning a critique of the limits of these conditions. The role of philosophy as interpreter that Habermas describes, is not capable of fulfilling this critique. Its role is that of reconciling antagonistic claims within the conditions that are already established. Habermas admits to the need for a discourse on the social totality, but institutes this as a descriptive or positive discourse on the tripartite constitution of the spheres of value and the tangential lifeworld, which make up modernity for Habermas. Habermas's 'modernism' therefore takes the peculiarly conservative form of re-assuring modernity of its constitution. He acknowledges the critical task of modernism as a critique of the reification of the antagonisms inherent in modernity, but limits this to incremental corrections. Habermas transforms Critical Theory from a revolutionary into a reformist critique of modernity. *Critical Theory*' revolutionary claims are rendered reactionary. This discards the form of critique at stake within modernism, which is the key to Adorno's philosophical modernism: namely, an unconfirmable critical gesture of negating the status quo in order to reveal possibilities that are structurally excluded from its current form. Habermas's objection to the fusion of unreconstructed metaphysics and utopianism in Adorno blindly recognises a modernist critique of society without knowing it.<sup>6</sup> Immanence will always experience its criticism as utopian or dogmatic.

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<sup>6</sup> This is the position Wellmer has adopted. Albrecht Wellmer, 'Metaphysics at the Moment of its Fall' (1988) trans. D. Midgley (MIT Press, Cambridge Ma., London, 1998), pp.183-202.

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